SEEKING INTEGRATION:

AUSTIN REFUGEES AND THEIR JOURNEY TOWARD ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND LINGUISTIC SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

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Since the creation of the U.S. refugee resettlement program with the Refugee Act of 1980 and the emergence several large-scale violent conflicts, such as those in Syria, Somalia, and Afghanistan, the origins of resettled refugees have diversified significantly. With this diversification of background has also come a diversification of pre-migration circumstances. Refugees now being resettled in the U.S. come with a unique set of experiences and varied exposure to educational opportunities. As a result, refugee resettlement agencies and local school districts find it increasingly difficult to fulfill the academic, social, and linguistic needs of refugee students, who each enter a school with a set of unique needs. Obstacles to successful refugee integration are especially challenging in a school atmosphere, where refugee students are confronted with a multitude of additional stresses, such as increased social pressures, academic requirements, and the pursuit of post-secondary options.

This thesis will focus on the efforts of one school district, the Austin Independent School District (AISD), to fulfill the needs of its refugee students. The first task is to understand the establishment of the refugee resettlement system in the U.S., its design, and the local schema of actors and services supporting refugees in Austin, Texas. The second task is to provide a description of national, state, and local policies pertaining to the education and academic support of refugee students. Third, I will synthesize existing literature pertaining to refugee education to describe the main pre- and post-migration challenges facing refugee students in the school context. Lastly, I will present the findings of interviews conducted with external service providers in Austin who discussed the main obstacles to integration that refugee students enrolled in AISD schools report they must overcome.

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Introduction

On the morning of September 2nd, 2015, a battered group of Syrian refugees crowded onto a small inflatable dinghy departing from the beach of Bodrum, Turkey. The Kurdis, a Syrian family of Kurdish origin, were on the boat, hoping to seek refuge from the Syrian Civil War with relatives in Canada. These aspirations, however, were abruptly curtailed when the boat capsized in the middle of the ocean, leaving its passengers without a lifeline for survival. Alan Kurdi, his brother Ghalib, and his mother Rihanna drowned, joining the roughly 3,800 other refugees who died in the eastern Mediterranean in 2015 (Walsh, 2015).

When graphic photos of Alan, the three-year-old member of the Kurdi family who washed up on the shores of a Turkish beach, began to surface in late 2015, the Syrian refugee crisis garnered a level of collective global attention that had not existed previously. Alan Kurdi became a chilling symbol for the sacrifice many refugee families are willing to make to escape the perils of their home country and secure a better life for themselves and their children. At the same time, these photos also brought renewed focus to domestic refugee populations – those individuals who had escaped civil wars, domestic conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and more from Burma, Cuba, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, etc. and had been settled in countries around the world for years.

For many Americans, the death of Alan Kurdi was a call to action. Organizations that provided support to already-settled domestic refugee populations saw interest in volunteerism and community support increase substantially. For others, the Kurdi family and the millions of other refugees seeking asylum in Western countries represented an existential threat to the fabric of Western society. American Politicians and news outlets pointed to Cologne, Germany, which, after Angela Merkel promised to accept 800,000 refugees into the country, experienced a wave

of refugee violence on New Year's Eve of 2015 (Smale, 2016). These events, compounded by increased terrorist attacks worldwide and the widespread fear that many Syrians were members or sympathizers of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), fostered nativist and anti-migrant sentiment amongst many Americans.

Additionally, there emerged a debate surrounding the economic consequences of resettling refugee populations and the possible drain this demographic could have on government resources. As President Obama increased the number of refugees to be accepted in the U.S. from 85,000 in FY 2016 to 110,000 in FY 2017, many questioned whether U.S. communities possessed the local infrastructure needed to support refugees of all ages and empower them to become contributing members of American society (United States, 2016). For refugee adults, local resettlement agencies and partnering non-profits are meant to aid in most aspects of integrating into U.S. society, such as securing housing, a job, documentation, social benefits, and a community. For refugee children, this journey towards future success and economic empowerment begins in the classroom.

Refugee children experience a drastically different adjustment to life in the U.S. than their parents and much of this adjustment is defined by their experience at school. Much work has been done to ensure refugee populations are resettled in the U.S. and receive the support necessary to become financially, socially, and linguistically stable. But has the same amount of work been done to ensure that refugee youth are given the same opportunities to succeed? Are refugees currently in school given the same opportunities to succeed as their American peers?

Research Question and Methodology

This thesis seeks to understand the experiences of refugee youth who are resettled to the U.S. and are enrolled into local school districts. To do this, it will focus on the experiences of refugee students enrolled in Austin Independent School District (AISD) schools. Due to the limited amount of publicly available data pertaining to the academic performance of AISD's refugee students, as well as AISD restrictions that prevent undergraduate researchers from interviewing students, teachers, and administrators, it is beyond the purview of this thesis to provide an evaluation of whether AISD schools are meeting the needs of their refugee students. Instead, this thesis will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What do external service providers see as the major academic, social, and linguistic challenges that refugee students must overcome in AISD schools?
2. Do these challenges reflect those of refugees cited in existing studies and academic research?
3. What are the areas in which more research can be conducted to better understand refugee educational experiences in Austin and the U.S.?

To answer these research questions, I will rely on data gathered in interviews with external service providers. These service providers work at non-profits that partner with AISD schools to provide external services for refugee students. These services supplement the already existing services that AISD offers to refugees within schools. No interviews were conducted with students themselves, so all information gathered consists of secondhand accounts of refugee student experiences.

This thesis will also offer a brief analysis of publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). There exists no indicator in the data for refugees specifically, so the

English Language Learner (ELL) category will be used as a proxy for a refugee-only category. As the ELL indicator is the only data distinction that would include most, if not all, AISD refugee students and would not divide this population using indicators based on race or economic status, it serves at the only category that could come close to representing the essence of this population.

The main crux of this thesis, which is the analysis of refugee experiences in AISD schools, will only consider the experiences of refugees residing and attending schools in Austin, Texas. Other analysis of refugee student experiences pre- and post-migration will address challenges facing both national and international refugee populations. While I rely on analysis of individual refugee groups when constructing the theoretical framework for refugee educational challenges pre- and post-migration, this thesis will not delve into the potentially different experiences of individual refugee groups in AISD schools. As my analysis only draws from the secondhand accounts of refugee experiences from external service providers and state/district data that lacks specific refugee indicators, I am unable to document and provide analysis for AISD refugee students belonging to specific ethnic groups or hailing from particular countries of origin. Thus, refugees will be treated as a monolithic group with the caveat that, in reality, there exists a great deal of diversity in the AISD refugee population as well as in their pre- and post-migration experiences.

Thesis Outline

To address the treatment and support of AISD refugees, this thesis will consist of three main parts: background of refugee resettlement and education policy, a theoretical framework outlining common refugee challenges pre- and post-migration, and an analysis of the challenges

currently facing AISD's refugee student population according to external service providers. Background of refugee resettlement and education will not only provide the context for how a refugee enters the U.S. and enrolls in local school districts, but it will also offer a schema for Austin's resettlement network, including descriptions of primary resettlement agencies, supporting non-profits, and AISD infrastructure. This account of national and local resettlement offers a backdrop for refugee school experiences by highlighting the stage in the resettlement journey that marks the beginning of a refugee's post-migration experience in the U.S.

The theoretical framework outlining common refugee educational challenges in the national context will consider both pre- and post-migration experiences. My synthesis of existing research pertaining to refugee pre-migration experiences will rely on a Migration Policy report conducted by Sarah Dryden-Peterson. This report not only explains the tumultuous educational journeys of refugees in their countries of asylum, but also highlights the diversity of refugee experiences pre-migration. This diversity of experience, Peterson argues, affects refugee students in drastically different ways and, as a result, also impacts their educational journey in their host country post-migration. Following an analysis of pre-migration educational experiences will be an explication of common post-migration challenges facing refugee students in their U.S. classrooms. I will construct this analysis using the 2005 literature review of J. Lynn McBrien, who provides a comprehensive analysis of existing literature addressing refugee student experiences in the U.S. I will divide primary educational challenges into four main categories based on shared themes between different studies highlighted in McBrien's literature review: Discrimination and Cultural Acceptance, Language Acquisition, Parental Involvement and Support, and Policy, Research, and Educational Groupings.

Lastly, I will offer a practical application of this theoretical framework through an analysis of reports regarding refugee educational experiences in AISD schools. This analysis will be crafted using the insight and testimony of three outside service providers who work at three of the main non-profits that partner with AISD to provide services to refugee students. The purpose of this section is to offer insight into refugee educational experiences on the micro-level. Many of the challenges reportedly facing refugee students in AISD reflect the challenges faced by refugees in schools across the country and are, thus, vital to understanding how to better serve refugee students in Austin schools and in schools across the U.S. more generally.

Defining Refugee

As the Syrian refugee crisis came to the forefront of the United States' national conscious in recent years, there has been considerable confusion surrounding the difference between refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, immigrants, and undocumented immigrants. The United States refugee definition as it appears in the Refugee Act of 1980 derives from the international definition adopted by the United Nations (UN) in its 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocols, to which the US became a party in 1968 (UNHCR, 2011). The official definition as it appears in the 1951 Convention describes a refugee as an individual

> *who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside of the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 2011)*

A refugee differs from an asylee; asylum is sought from *within* the United States either at port of entry or after already entering the country with a different status or without one at all. A refugee comes to the U.S. *after* leaving his/her home country and then undergoing the refugee

status determination process. Asylees must meet the same refugee definition but are processed differently than those who arrive in the United States with refugee status, and are subsequently offered different benefits and services. The nationalities of asylees differ considerably from those of refugees, as asylum seekers arrive to the U.S. then seek asylum, rather than applying for refugee status from abroad (American Immigration Council, 2015). Additionally, refugees differ from internally displaced persons (IDPs). IDPs, like refugees, are forced to flee their homes, but have not crossed their country's border to find safety in a neighboring country. While IDPs and refugees might have fled for the same reasons, IDPs remain in-country under the protection of its government, even though the government might be the reason for their displacement (UNHCR, 2017, IDPs).

As defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, refugees do not leave their homes by choice and are forced to flee to escape persecution. They cannot return to their home country or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, religious, and tribal violence are the leading causes of refugees leaving their home countries (UNHCR, 2017, What is a Refugee?). E.F. Kunz (1973), a theorist who studied refugee movements, makes a distinction between two types of refugee movements: anticipatory and acute. Anticipatory refugee movements occur as a result of refugees foreseeing imminent strife in their home country. Anticipatory refugees likely have time to plan their departure and maybe even learn some of the language of the country to which they are fleeing. This refugee population tends to be educated and financially stable. Acute refugees flee their country at a time when danger is immediate. As a result, this group reflects the "traditional" depiction of refugees. Acute refugees are larger in number and often lack education, job skills, and financial stability. Since the 1990s, most refugee groups that have resettled in the US, such

as refugees fleeing violence in Iraq, the Balkans, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan, have belonged to this group (McBrien, 2005).

Why is this Study Important?

My primary interest in a study of this nature came from the emergence of the Syrian refugee crisis and its subsequent global impact in recent years. With almost 5 million people having fled Syria since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, countries around the world have responded to the increased need for hospitality towards refugees in recent years in different ways: in 2015, while countries in southern Europe strengthened their borders to curtail the steady stream of refugees entering the continent from the Mediterranean, Germany agreed to accept and resettle 800,000 refugees (Kirschbaum, 2015); since the implementation of the program #WelcomeRefugees in 2015, Canada has resettled 40,000 Syrian refugees through a mixture of government-assisted and private sponsorships (Government of Canada, 2017); and under the leadership of President Obama, the U.S. agreed to raise refugee admission from 70,000 to 110,000 by 2017 (United States, 2016). With the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, as well as the recent rise in populist movements around the world, positive sentiment toward refugee admissions amongst Western nations is no doubt at risk; however, as countries continue to resettle Syrian refugees and attempt to meet the needs of their already-resettled refugees, it is vital that national governments and local communities understand how to best support their burgeoning refugee populations.

For many refugees resettled in the U.S., especially refugee youth, their journey towards future prosperity and integration into U.S. culture begins in the classroom. Unfortunately, when looking at existing literature concerning the educational experiences of refugees in the U.S., I

soon realized that there exists a vacuum within the field of refugee-related research. Not only is research relating to refugee education sparse, but research examining the educational experiences of refugees resettled in the U.S. most recently, such as Iraqi and Syrian refugee populations, is virtually nonexistent. If the U.S. is to understand the needs of its refugee populations and provide the support and resources necessary to ensure the future success of refugee youth, the body of research elucidating and analyzing the challenges facing refugee students in U.S. schools must expand.

This thesis reflects the most recent obstacles facing refugee students in Austin, Texas – whose largest refugee population is Arab – as reported by service providers. Through an outline of the educational experiences of refugee youth in Austin, as reported by organizations that service this population, this thesis attempts to fill a gap in the research. It offers observations for how both Austin and communities across the nation can better understand and support their refugee students.

Chapter 1 – National and Local Refugee Resettlement

To better understand a refugee youth's journey to integration in Austin, Texas, it is first necessary to understand the qualifications that constitute a refugee, the process a refugee must undergo to be "resettled" under national law, and the broader context in which refugees are being resettled in Texas, as well as the United States more generally.

The Establishment of the Refugee Resettlement System

The primary piece of legislation that dictates refugee admission and resettlement in the United States is the Refugee Act of 1980, whose provisions are contained in Title IV, chapter 2 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The United States passed its first piece of refugee-related legislation closely following World War II to address the plight of Eastern Europeans, who were displaced from and fearful of returning to their Communist-ruled home countries. Following this initial temporary legislation came a series of *ad hoc* acts, which operated outside of general immigration laws and were enacted in response to specific incidents or crises. Such acts included the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, the Refugee Act of 1953, and the Refugee-Escapee Act of 1957. The definition of a refugee, quota for refugee admissions, and services offered to refugees were developed more concretely in a 30-year period post-WWII starting with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and continuing with amendments and extensions in both 1965 – to account for an increase in Cuban refugees – and 1977 – to facilitate the resettlement of large amounts of Indochinese refugees (Roberts, 1982).

Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 soon after this period to address the deficiencies of the 1952 act and establish a more comprehensive refugee policy for the country pursuant to its obligations under the UN Refugee Convention (Roberts, 1982). The act

established the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program, which mandates the effective resettlement of refugees and the efficient delivery of services to assist in a refugee's economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible post-resettlement (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012). For each fiscal year, the president and Congress collaborate and jointly mandate a numerical cap for United States refugee admissions, as well as an "unallocated reserve" as a contingency in the case of a country going to war or more refugees needing to be admitted on a regional basis.

Since the establishment of this 1980 legislation, global refugee numbers reached unprecedented levels and refugee demographics diversified considerably as several countries fell victim to large-scale war, conflict, or persecution. The number of refugees displaced worldwide has increased from an estimated 8.5 million in 1980 to 14.4 million in 2014 to 23.1 million as of the end of 2016 (UNHCR, 2017, The World in Numbers). The top countries of origin are Syria (4.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), and Somalia (1.1 million) (Edwards, 2016). These worldwide changes have required changes and responses in the U.S. refugee system.

To account for the increased displacement of Syrians as a result of the ongoing Syrian civil war, President Obama increased the FY 2015 refugee admissions ceiling to 70,000 and announced his plan to raise this number to 85,000 in FY 2016 and then to 110,000 by FY 2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2015). As of FY 2016, refugees are resettled in the United States from more than 79 countries, with 70 percent of them fleeing five countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia. Additionally, over 72 percent of resettled refugees are women and children and include many who are single mothers, those in need of urgent medical care, survivors of torture, LGBTI persons, religious minorities, and others who are victims of various levels of violence and persecution (U.S. Department of State, 2017). According to Department of State figures from FY 2015, roughly a fourth of refugees resettled in the U.S. are

school age (though percentage of school age admissions differ based on country of origin) (United States, 2016).

The Resettlement Process

The United States Federal Refugee Resettlement Program is carried out jointly between the Department of State Bureau of Population Refugee and Migration (PRM), the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHH), and various offices in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Within DHS is housed U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which determines individual eligibility for refugee status based on a series of extended interviews. Before a refugee is officially referred for resettlement in the United States, he/she must also undergo a series of interviews, screenings, and security clearances conducted by Regional Refugee Coordinators (RRCs) and oversea Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs), which operate through and coordinate with PRM. Because a refugee must be outside of his/her country of origin to apply for refugee status, most refugees undergo this extensive pre-resettlement process while in camps or other precarious circumstances.

Once a refugee is conditionally accepted for resettlement in the United States, the RSC requests an assurance of placement from the Department of State, and the Refugee Processing Center (RPC) partners with private voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), such as the International Rescue Committee, the Church World Service, and the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, to find a refugee's future place of residence. Resettled refugees do not need to have a "sponsor," but those with relatives living in the United States will likely be placed in the same city or at a location nearby. On average, from the start of vetting to resettlement, refugees are resettled after 18-24 months (American Immigration Council, 2015).

After one year of residence in the United States, a refugee has the opportunity to apply for Lawful Permanent Resident ("LPR") status. Per appropriate adjustment to LPR status, a refugee may then petition for naturalization five years after his/her initial arrival in the United States (Texas Health and Human Services, 2017; American Immigration Council, 2015).

Once a refugee receives his/her place of resettled residence, the Department of State coordinates with local resettlement agencies to carry out resettlement and the delivery of services for a refugee's first 90 days in the United States. This includes the securing of housing, food and clothing, employment advising, medical care, and other necessities. Various social services are also available to refugees who have lived in the country for five years or less. Within six months of arrival, refugees are expected to have secured a steady job. The federal government provides the funding for resettlement agencies, which is coordinated through an office within the refugee's state of residence (e.g. the Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs in Texas) (American Immigration Council, 2015).

Resettlement agencies, which primarily focus on the immediate needs of a refugee during his/her first three months in the United States, are supported by outside non-profits and organizations that focus on a refugee's long-term social, cultural, and economic integration. Oftentimes, these organizations partner with state governments and receive financial support for programs and services that contribute to a refugee's social and economic integration. Within the ORR is housed the Division of Resettlement Services, which provides assistance through local public and private non-profit agencies and coordinates a variety of programs working towards different facets of a refugee's integration. Many of these agencies participate in the Matching Grant Program, which provides public assistance in exchange for the establishment and coordination of comprehensive multilingual, multicultural services at local sites. Other agency-

facilitated programs include services that work towards the improved supply and quality of food in urban and rural areas, the facilitation of community building and cultural adjustment, and financial independence through the development of capital resources and business expertise (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2017).

There also exist certain programs that focus on providing services to certain demographics within a state's refugee population. In addition to programs for older refugees, refugees with special needs, and refugees of a certain ethnic group, the ORR facilitates state grants to distribute to certain school districts to pay for programs and activities that seek the comprehensive integration and education of refugee youth (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2017).

Refugee Resettlement in Austin, Texas

In FY 2015, 38 percent of the 69,933 refugees resettled in the United States were resettled in six states – Texas, California, New York, Arizona, Michigan, and Ohio – with Texas accepting the highest number of refugees at 11% of the nation's refugee population. Statistically, Texas is integral to national refugee resettlement efforts and is a state that has gradually established itself as a bedrock of refugee acceptance and integration. The four top counties receiving refugees within Texas are Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, and Travis, which includes the city of Austin (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2015). Although resettlement agencies often differ from city to city, there are resettlement agencies that coordinate refugee resettlement in multiple cities across Texas, such as Refugee Services of Texas (RST), which has offices in Amarillo, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston (Refugee Services of Texas, 2017).

Within Austin, refugee resettlement is funneled through two resettlement agencies: RST and Caritas of Austin. These two resettlement agencies have together resettled the roughly 12,000 refugees that currently live in Austin. Since 2000, most of Austin's refugees have come from African countries (such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea), Afghanistan, Iraq, Burma, and Cuba. However, in recent years, resettlement agencies have seen more refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria (Austin Public Health, 2017). As was stated in the Introduction, Travis County, the county in which Austin exists, was made up of 35% Iraqi refugees, 29% Cuban, 8% Afghani, 8% Burmese, and 20% from other African and Asian countries, such as Somalia, Sudan, Nepal, Iran, and more (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2015).

RST partners with various volunteers, faith-based communities, social service groups, and businesses, and is an affiliate of larger national organizations, such as the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Church World Service, and Episcopal Migration Ministries. With the assistance of this support network, RST delivers a wide variety of services to resettled refugees in the Austin area including: welcoming refugees at the airport and transporting them to their place of residence; securing and setting up apartments; school enrollment; health screenings; employment consultations; and orientation to the Austin community. In addition to these basic services, RST offers other programs that address more specific needs of some resettled refugees. There are low-cost legal services available through Board of Immigration Appeals accredited representatives, who help resettled refugees with issues such as status adjustment, naturalization, and family reunification. RST Austin leads the effort in Central Texas of providing support to survivors of human trafficking with its Survivors of Human Trafficking Empowerment Program (STEP), which provides access to 24-hour support to identified

survivors. Additionally, this agency offers job readiness training, English language training, long-term case management for refugees with emergency needs and difficulties, counseling to cope with past trauma, as well as medical managers for the delivery of better access to better healthcare and medical services (Refugee Services of Texas, 2017).

Caritas of Austin is Austin's second primary resettlement agency. This organization provides services to individuals and families who lack a place of residence and stable income. This includes veterans, women, and children in addition to refugees. Like RST, Caritas provides for the immediate needs of refugees and connects them to resources that help facilitate their self-sufficiency within their first 3-6 months in the United States. These resources include ESL training, healthcare, financial assistance, transportation, education, employment counseling, and various community services. Additionally, Caritas provides clients with access to a Community Kitchen, take-home groceries, and education classes that train refugees in topics like money management, cultural orientation, life skills, and workforce development. These services are carried out in partnership with a variety of community organizations, including the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition, One Voice Central Texas, and the Austin: Welcoming City Initiative (Caritas of Austin, 2017).

Both RST and Caritas of Austin are members of the Austin Refugee Roundtable, a coalition of Austin organizations that collectively work towards the goal of improving services offered to Austin's refugees and fostering a collaborative and supportive resettlement community. RST and Caritas share membership with several interreligious ministries, as well as two of the most prominent Austin non-profits that continue providing services to refugees after they have left the oversight of resettlement agencies: the Multicultural Refugee Coalition (MRC) and Interfaith Action of Central Texas (iACT) (Austin Refugee Roundtable, 2017).

In close collaboration, Austin resettlement agencies and local non-profits work to provide integration support and practical services at various stages throughout a refugee's resettlement journey. In addition to promoting the self-sufficiency of adult refugees, resettlement agencies and outside support networks also work to promote integration within a refugee youth's school atmosphere. Various external support services target refugee youth and attempt to equip them with the educational and cultural tools to thrive in a primary or secondary school atmosphere.

Additionally, grant money, such as that offered through the federal Refugee School Impact Program, is often offered to school districts with large concentrations of refugee students to support programs that better facilitate these students' integration and education. As of FY 2015, Texas received $1,000,000 in grant money – the most money awarded to any one state – as part of this program. These programs target refugees between the ages of 5 and 18 with activities including: English as a Second Language (ESL) coaching; after-school tutoring; programs that encourage participation in school-offered activities; programs that encourage high school completion; summer clubs; programs that facilitate parental involvement; bilingual and bicultural counselors; and interpreters (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2017).

These supplemental programs, sponsored by federal and state governments as well as local organizations, have become more necessary than ever in recent years within the school context as refugee populations continue to grow and diversify and schools struggle to meet the mounting linguistic, academic, and social needs of their refugee students. AISD, especially, must face these challenges as a school district situated in a city and state with high levels of refugee resettlement. AISD currently provides services to 1101 refugee students at 91 schools in the district, 33 of which serve 10 or more refugee students. Refugee students make up 1% total of AISD's student population and 92.8% receive ESL services. Refugees in AISD come from 39

different countries, mostly Muslim-majority countries, and speak languages ranging from French to Arabic to Pashto to Swahili (Chang, 2017). In the school context, refugee students are confronted with a multitude of stresses that result in greater difficulty integrating in their school environment and U.S. society more generally. These challenges are the focus of this thesis and will be explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 – National Education Policy and Local Educational Integration

Post-resettlement, refugees must navigate a series of policies and requirements at the national and local levels to initiate their educational journey in the United States. Most of these policies stem from the United States Department of Education, which has put in place a series of protections that ensure every child, regardless of migration or documentation status, has equal access to education. All states and local school districts carry out the implementation of Department of Education regulations with minor variations, such as the ages students have access to education, the process through which students must enter the local education system, and the local organizations available to refugee students for supplemental educational services.

Austin Independent School District (AISD), specifically, has established several offices that are meant to provide a smooth enrollment into AISD schools. After refugee students are enrolled in a school and grade that fit their age and expected education level, various AISD offices and external organizations offer a wide range of supplemental services that are meant to support a refugee's adaptation to a new school system and success in academic pursuits.

In this chapter, I will trace the national and local policies regarding refugee student education. At the federal level, this includes an explanation of the statutes in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the *Plyler v. Doe* court case, U.S. Department of Education guidelines, and the Dear Colleague Letter of 2014, all of which have established historical precedent for what education rights are guaranteed to refugee, immigrant, undocumented, and asylum-seeking students. I will follow this explication of national requirements with a description of Texas and AISD infrastructure that exists for refugee students and the specific offices with which students must interface on a regular basis to enter Austin's high school system.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a holistic picture of the rights guaranteed to refugee students regarding their education, the steps students must take to enter Austin's education system, and the services available to students both within AISD infrastructure and outside of it.

National Education Policy Regarding Refugee and Other Migrant Students

Per United States law, all children, regardless of their national origin, citizenship, or immigration status are guaranteed equal access to education. This guarantee stems from protections implemented over time by various pieces of legislation, court rulings, and Department of Education guidance. The three hallmark moments that established precedent for migrant education were the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Supreme Court ruling in the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* case, and the Departments of Education and Justice's joint issuance of the Dear Colleague Letter* of 2014 (MacDonnell, 2016). As these laws and guidance apply to all migrants, refugee youth are beneficiaries of these policies.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 establishes the legal foundation for treatment of refugee and other migrant students in the US. The statutes that apply specifically to migrant education are Titles IV and VI. Title IV mandates that public elementary and secondary schools cannot discriminate against students based on race, color, or national origin, among other factors. Expanding on this, Title VI says that recipients of Federal financial assistance cannot discriminate against students based on the same factors. Interpretations of the Civil Rights Act add that school districts are prohibited from "unjustifiably utilizing criteria or methods of

*Dear Colleague Letters are not legally binding documents, but are instead guidance issued by US departments to clarify and/or reinforce US policy already in place

administration that have the effect of subjecting individuals to discrimination because of their race, color, or national origin, or have the effect of defeating or substantially impairing accomplishment of the objectives of a program for individuals of a particular race, color, or national origin" (United States, 2014). In summary, the legal restrictions put in place by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 address both effect and intent, as they forbid any entity that is a recipient of Federal financial assistance, including primary or secondary public schools, from discriminating against students, intentionally or not, based on race, color, or national origin.

The 1982 Supreme Court case*, Plyler v. Doe*, adds another layer of educational protection for migrant children by stipulating that states cannot constitutionally deny students free public education based on their immigration status. This case was born out of a 1975 law passed by the Texas legislature that allowed school districts to deny public school education to foreign-born children who were not "legally admitted" to the US. This was compounded by a policy adopted by Tyler Independent School District (TISD) two years later that required foreign-born children not considered "legally admitted" to pay school tuition. TISD considered students "legally admitted" if they 1) possessed documentation that proved their legal presence in the country or 2) received confirmation from federal immigration that they were in the process of obtaining such documentation. After a group of students from Mexico brought a class action lawsuit to challenge these policies, and the lawsuit reached the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that undocumented students should constitutionally have access to free public education. The Court added that "by denying these children a basic education, we deny them the ability to live within the structure of our civic institutions, and foreclose any realistic possibility that they will contribute even the smallest way to the progress of our Nation" (American Immigration Council, 2016).

Most recently, the Department of Education and Department of Justice joint issuance of the Dear Colleague Letter of 2014, which replaced a 2011 letter addressing the same topic, reinforced the above policies and cemented that states must provide all migrant children, regardless of country of origin, citizenship, or immigration status, access to free public education. The Letter references the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and *Plyler v. Doe* as the legal foundation for the rights that local school districts must guarantee to migrant students. The document expounds upon these requirements with several legal clarifications. It states that districts may request and accept documentation from students for the purposes of establishing residency, determining age, or reporting race and ethnicity of student populations, but not with the intent or result of forbidding student access to schools based on race, color, or national origin. Additionally, students cannot be denied enrollment in a school district if his/her parent or guardian chooses not to provide documentation outside of that which establishes residency, such as social security number. The Dear Colleague Letter concludes by re-affirming the two departments' commitment to enforcing civil rights law regarding migrant education and providing any technical assistance to local school districts to ensure equal access to educational opportunities for all students. Philosophically, this document mirrors the *Plyler v. Doe* court ruling in its emphasis on the need for all students to have access to education, regardless of migrant status, so that they might have equal opportunity to succeed in life (United States, 2014).

Together, these three moments in the history of US education policy establish the rights guaranteed to refugee children, as well as other migrant youth, in local school districts nation-wide present day. Each is rooted in the belief that the resources and time spent educating refugee and migrant youth are worth it because of the benefits that US society will enjoy as a result of long-term migrant success.

Migrant Educational Support at the State Level

While the above policies establish national anti-discrimination regulations for refugee students, the materialization of migrant student support at the state level can be found in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This act was reauthorized in 2015 when President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act. Title I, Part C addresses migrant student needs specifically through the establishment of state Migrant Education Programs (MEPs). The funds for these programs are provided by the federal government and distributed by state governments (United States, 2004).

MEPs serve several purposes: they support programs that limit educational disruptions and other complications that result from repeated moves; they ensure that local school districts provide migrant students with the appropriate educational support that addresses their specific needs in an efficient manner; they guarantee that migrant students receive the support necessary to meet state academic standards that all students must meet; they design initiatives that help students overcome educational disruption, cultural and language barriers, social isolation, various health-related problems, and other factors that inhibit the ability of such children to do well in school; and they prepare migrant students to make the transition from secondary school to postsecondary education or employment. (Texas Education Agency, 2017)

The Texas MEP is the second largest in the country and administers its services through local school districts and educational service centers (ESCs)[*]. This program currently enrolls approximately 45,000 migrant students out of a Texas public school enrollment that totals roughly five million students (Texas Education Agency, 2017). Additionally, the Texas MEP

[*] There are 20 ESCs in Texas that serve as liaisons between the US Department of Education and local school districts. AISD is under ESC 13.

offers subgrants to local school districts. School districts can apply to create an MEP-funded program that benefits migrant students at the local level. The TEA awards state-level discretionary grants to various external entities to assist in the execution of projects that are granted support by the Texas MEP (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

Texas also offers grant funding for local school districts leading initiatives that benefit refugee students specifically. The Refugee School Impact Program, which is federally funded and housed in the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHS), grants financial support to school districts that create activities and programs that help facilitate the effective integration and education of refugee children. These programs must target school-age refugee students from ages 5 to 18 with services that include: English as a Second Language instruction; after-school tutoring; initiatives that support high school completion and participation in school-sponsored activities; after-school and summer clubs; programs that promote parental involvement; bilingual/bicultural counselors; and interpreter personnel (Texas Health and Human Services, 2017).

Austin Independent School District and its Infrastructure for Refugee Students

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) is a Texas school district whose specialized services for refugee students are funded through these state-sponsored programs. Texas HHS receives one million dollars annually from the Refugee School Impact Program, $116,000 of which is distributed to AISD. These funds are further supplemented by other local and state monies (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015).

AISD services for refugee students are housed in two main offices: the International Welcome Center (IWC) and the Refugee Support Office. The AISD IWC serves as the local

touchpoint for refugees entering the Austin school system. By serving as the official liaison between families and AISD, the IWC connects students with the school that most appropriately fits their educational level and academic needs. This office also connects refugee students and families to school and community resources (Austin ISD, 2017, IWC).

After families are resettled in Austin, the AISD IWC connects them to campus staff who facilitate a student's school registration and placement. Throughout the enrollment process, this office conducts family and student interviews and screenings that provide information about AISD procedures, review school registration information, and assist with enrollment documentation. The IWC will refer high school age refugee students to International High School, a two-year program for immigrant students who have not attended another school in the US, and will refer them to their home campus if they do not qualify for placement. This center is also the entity that conducts orientations for refugee parents and students. Orientations cover an overview of the school day, transportation options, safety, dress code, and school behavior (Austin ISD, 2017, IWC).

Additionally, the IWC provides English Proficiency Testing (English and Spanish) for new-to-district students entering AISD high schools, middle schools, and select elementary schools. Through the schools, the IWC monitors a refugee student's English progress and assessment results to measure language acquisition. IWC services are designed to help refugee students acclimate to American culture without losing their own cultural identity (Austin ISD, 2017, IWC).

While the IWC provides services for all immigrant populations, the AISD Refugee Support Office focuses specifically on refugee and asylee students. The Refugee Support Office serves as the language and resource hub for AISD's refugee and asylee population. The AISD

Refugee Team translates into 18 different languages for a variety of occasions, including parent/teacher conferences, day-to-day interpretation, campus events, home visits, and disciplinary matters. These language support services are critical in the resettlement process. Additionally, the Refugee Support Office complements the work of the IWC by offering school registration support, tutoring, special education assistance, social/emotional support, as well as training for school staff and community agencies (Austin ISD, 2017, Refugee/Immigrant Services).

Through these offices, AISD tracks refugee students through part of their time in the Austin school system – the Refugee Support Office tracks students for their first three years and the IWC tracks for their first year only. When refugee students first enroll in a school, they are also tested through the AISD IWC to determine English proficiency upon entry and appropriate grade level placement (based primarily on age) (Austin ISD, 2017, IWC & Refugee/Immigrant Services).

As will be explored in Chapter 3, many students entering local schools grew up in war-torn environments or refugee camps, where they lack regular educational opportunities. This leads to refugee students entering grade levels that do not align with their actual educational ability, which may put students at a higher risk of dropping out (Chang, 2017). These students are often referred to as SIFE, or Students with Interrupted Formal Education.

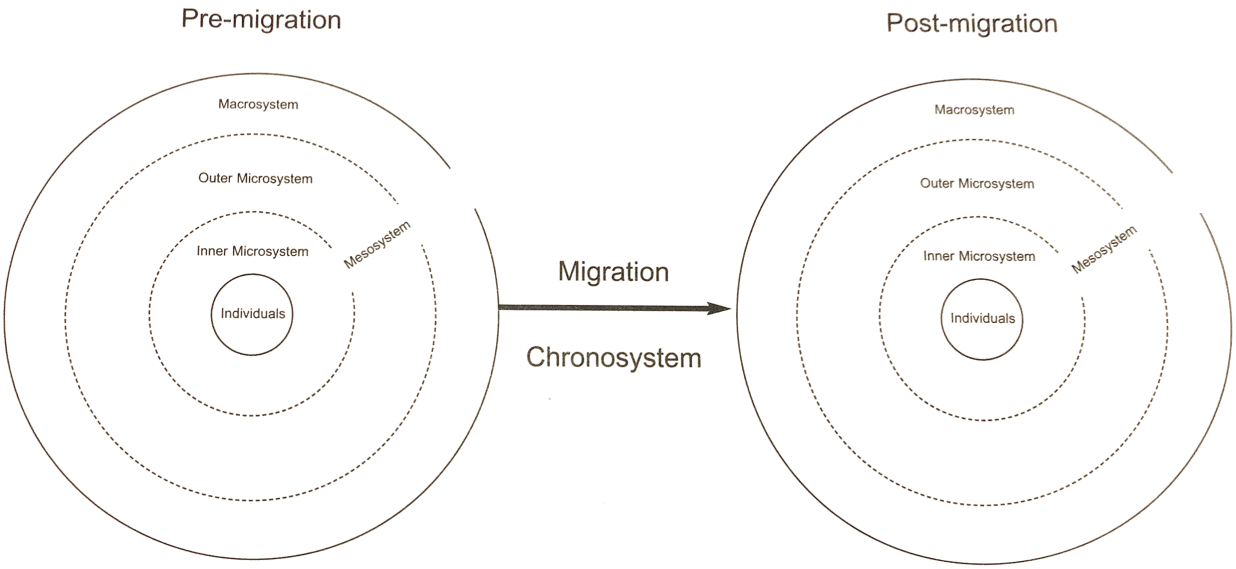
Services offered through AISD's IWC and Refugee Support Office are meant to address the linguistic, academic, and social challenges that arise for refugee students within their school. However, these offices, which are responsible for addressing the needs for all refugee and asylee students enrolled in AISD schools, must draw on the support of outside organizations as well. AISD officials work with more than a half-dozen non-profits and resettlement agencies to aid in

a student's transition to school and life in the US. These organizations include Interfaith Action of Central Texas (iACT), Amaanah Refugee Services, the Amala Foundation, and GirlForward, and Center for Survivors of Torture, all of which engage in an official partnership with AISD and work with refugee students within the school. RST and Caritas offer their own academic, social, and linguistic support, but this assistance operates separately and externally from AISD or any formal partnership between the school district and resettlement agencies.

Chapter 3 – Educational Challenges for Refugee Students

Refugee students enter a U.S. school environment shouldering a set of challenging, often violent, experiences that directly affect their academic experience in the United States. As refugees were forced to flee their country of origin and settle in one or more surrounding countries before resettling in the U.S., the educational history of most refugee youth is limited and disrupted. The literature suggests that gaps in schooling may make acclimation to a formal school setting in a local US school district more difficult. In addition to interrupted schooling, refugee students may face a wide variety of other obstacles that are unknown to U.S.-born students. Refugee youth may experience difficulties within U.S. schools stemming from a complex mixture of both pre-migration and post-migration factors and circumstances.

This interaction between pre-resettlement and post-resettlement experiences and how each affects a refugee child's educational experience in a host country is best laid out in the work of Hamilton and Moore (2004), who created an ecological model of factors that could affect refugee youths' educational progress.



Citation: Rutter (2006), adapted from Hamilton and Moore (2004)

In addition to factors specific to the individual, a refugee child's educational development is shaped by events within their inner microsystem (i.e. family environment) and outer microsystem (i.e. school and community). This development is also influenced by the national context of a host country (i.e. the macrosystem) and the mesosystem, which entails the interaction between an individual's micro and macrosystems. A refugee youth's arrival to the U.S. is prefaced by pre-migration interactions with specific microsystems, macrosystems, and mesosystems. Pre-migration interactions then inform and complicate a child's post-migration interactions. This theoretical framework at its core acknowledges that a refugee student's experiences in the host country classroom is colored by a complicated coalescing of pre-migration and post-migration events, factors, and interactions (Rutter, 2006).

This chapter will explore the educational challenges refugee students confront both pre- and post-resettlement in the U.S. and how these challenges impact a refugee student's educational journey after settling in the U.S. As Hamilton and Moore acknowledge, grasping pre- and post-migration experiences is vital to reaching a more holistic understanding of the challenges common to refugee students.

Educational Experiences of Refugee Youth Pre-Migration

A refugee youth's past experiences in their home country and countries of initial displacement can have a monumental impact on how that child encounters their school environment, builds relationships, and develops their academic skills. Refugee families arrive in the U.S. from many countries and diverse socioeconomic, political, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. This means that their pre-resettlement histories are also varied and complicated in

nature. Unfortunately, many teachers and staff in US schools do not see or understand these pre-resettlement histories. Oftentimes, they are hidden by other factors, such as language barriers, privacy concerns, cultural misunderstandings, and stereotypes. For educators to understand the needs of their refugee students, they must first grasp how the tumultuous and jarring experiences refugee youths have lived pre-arrival inform their educational experiences post-arrival.

In times of conflict, war, and extended gang violence, children are often those who pay the highest price. As of 2016, there are roughly 67 million primary school-aged children not attending school, with 40 million living in countries affected by widespread armed conflict (USAID, 2017). These conflicts and situations of extended violence strip opportunities for reliable education from whole generations of children. Furthermore, education is treated as a low priority during humanitarian crises, as securing food, water, and health access are often seen as the international community's most pressing concerns. As a result, little of global humanitarian aid is spent on developing educational infrastructure in unstable countries (Norad, 2016).

Access to education remains limited when children and their families are forced to leave their country of origin. There are currently 21.3 million refugees scattered worldwide, half of whom are children (18 or younger) (UNHCR, 2017, Figures at a Glance). As of 2013, developing countries host 86 percent of the world's refugees. The refugee youth in these countries experience conditions that make them some of the most educationally marginalized children in the world. As many developing countries are partially or completely conflict-ridden, many refugee children spend the entirety of their childhoods surrounded by unstable settings with scarce opportunity for consistent education (UNHCR, 2017, Figures at a Glance).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is tasked with providing education to refugees globally after taking over the mandate from the United Nations

Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The UNHCR coordinates its educational services in a country with the governments of the nation states that receive refugees. In past years, a refugee's right to education has depended on each country's laws, policies, and practices in place at different historical times in varying national contexts. Variation has existed even amongst signatories of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which, as mentioned previously, is meant to guarantee certain rights and protections to refugee populations (UNHCR, 2011). This means that refugees are prone to have drastically different educational experiences depending on which country or countries they arrive at after leaving their home country. Access to education also differs for refugees based on factors independent from the country itself, such as nationality, gender, or residence in a camp versus urban setting.

The UNHCR created a number, the Gross Enrollment Ration, that measures the distribution of children enrolled in a particular level of education, regardless of age, and is expressed as a percentage of the population considered to be within the official age group for that level of education. GERs have the potential to exceed 100 as a result of late entry to school or grade repetition. In 2009, which is the latest year for which data is available, the average primary school GER for refugees was 76 percent across 47 urban areas and 92 camps in 73 countries. For secondary school, the GER was 36 percent across 48 urban areas and 92 camps from 75 countries. Both GERs were considerably lower than the 2009 global averages, which were 90 percent for primary schools and 67 percent for secondary. GERs saw substantial variation from country to country, indicating the same variation in educational access and enrollment (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Schooling interruptions happen for several reasons and at different stages of migration. For refugee youth whose home countries are in the midst of acute conflict, schooling is often

limited or nonexistent. This leads to overage learners in countries of first asylum who are enrolled in grades that may correspond to their education level, but not their age. Additionally, many refugees must face legal restrictions to their education, including in their country of first asylum. This is especially, though not exclusively, accurate for countries who have yet to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention or the following 1967 Protocol. Some refugee groups have difficulties attaining refugee status in the countries where they first flee and are thus unable to enroll in schools. Others have access to schools, but fear the distance they need to walk as they run the risk of being exposed to authorities. Lastly, many refugees experience disruptions in schooling as they pursue future migration opportunities. This includes travel within a country (e.g. from urban centers to refugee camps for interviews or various resettlement opportunities), as well as travel between countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Linguistically, refugee youth arrive to the U.S. with differing levels of language proficiency, both in their native language and the languages of their country/countries of asylum. Originally, UNHCR advocated for refugee instruction to be in the language of their country of origin, as the long-term goal was repatriation to the home country. However, as more extended conflicts have emerged in recent years, the UNHCR has shifted its policy focus to encourage instruction within national education systems, which entails acquisition of a new language. This transition from one language to another can prevent access to the content of education. Additionally, the UNHCR's shift in focus, as well as national and subnational shifts in education policy refugees for that occur within the country, often mean that refugee students are introduced to a variety of languages in their countries of first asylum but reach academic proficiency in none. These linguistic challenges are only exacerbated by the limited experience of teachers,

who are rarely trained to handle the diversity of language in their refugee classrooms and often use the languages at their disposal to help students understand them (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Even for refugee youth who have access to education in the country to which they have initially fled, they are still likely to have reached an academic level lower than the expected level for their age due to inadequate quality of instruction. As expected, resources for educators teaching in refugee settings in the developing world is limited and the student-to-teacher ratio is high. Oftentimes, teachers also have limited training and qualifications. The same 2009 figures cited above confirm that, as is the case with most refugee experiences, educational quality differs substantially from country to country. The UNHCR has a goal of 40 children to one teacher with 80 percent of teachers receiving training of at least 10 days. The child-to-teacher ratios spanned from 18:1 in Ghana to 70:1 in Pakistan, and the share of trained teachers as a part of the total number of teachers ranged from 0 percent in Djibouti to 100 percent in Eritrea. Pedagogically, instruction is often teacher-centered, which works against child-centered methods based in participation. Many international classrooms for refugee students rely on lectures and factual questions, as opposed to discussion-based instruction. The dominance of this method discourages dialogue, thorough explanation, and student-participation (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Lastly, discrimination in the classrooms of countries of first asylum can remove the cognitive protection usually associated with successful schooling and exacerbate educational hardships for refugee youth. If refugee students experience forms of harassment and discrimination pre-resettlement, these experiences could influence the ways they perceive school and their relationships with peers and teachers when they enter the U.S. education system. Students can encounter this discrimination both in school curriculum and through interaction with students and educators. In counties of first asylum, the content of instruction can be difficult

to relate to due to cultural differences and, sometimes, blatantly politicized and/or discriminatory teaching. When refugee students enter national schools with nationals of their host country, curriculum is often foreign and difficult to understand for someone who does not come from that country and cultural background. This difficulty with curriculum can be worsened through classroom discussion and practice, where many refugees feel that their refugee identity is highlighted in a negative way. Additionally, many refugee students face direct discrimination in host-country schools through ethnically-based harassment by other students and biased treatment by educators. This discrimination typically occurs when children of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds coming from different countries are forced to integrate without enough attention given to the challenges that arise from dissimilar groups living together (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Although refugee students share many of these challenges when navigating their pre-resettlement educational journey, there still exists a large degree of variation in individual experiences. It is clear from analyzing the most common difficulties that refugee youth encounter in their host-countries that political, economic, social, and cultural factors in a particular country lead to drastic variation in educational infrastructure and conditions between countries. Additionally, each refugee group has endured a set of circumstances specific to their country of origin that affects how they experience the educational infrastructure of their host country. As I continue to explore the challenges refugee students face post-resettlement within U.S. classrooms, it is important to remember that refugee experiences pre-resettlement are not monolithic. Refugee students bring extended histories to the classroom that will differ from one student to the next. Although refugee students face many of the same challenges in U.S. schools post-resettlement, the ways in which refugees react to, adapt to, and internalize these challenges will differ.

Educational Challenges for Refugee Youth Post-Resettlement

After refugee youth are resettled in the U.S. and enter the U.S. education system, each student navigates an educational journey unique to their background and past experiences. Additionally, there exists substantial differences in how schools, school districts, and communities support their refugee student populations. Despite this variation, however, many refugees are confronted with similar challenges within their school environment. While it is impossible to speak to every refugee's experience, the following explication of obstacles facing refugee students in U.S. classrooms is meant to generally and theoretically frame their basic educational difficulties based on past research and studies. This discussion will be guided using the work of J. Lynn McBrien, who penned a literature review of prominent research focused on elucidating the needs and barriers to education for refugee students in the U.S. Major challenges will be divided into the subcategories of Discrimination, Language Acquisition, Parental Support, and the Policy, Research, and Educational Groupings of refugees.

A. *Discrimination and Cultural Acceptance*

The political climate of the U.S. at the time of resettlement often colors the experiences of resettled refugees. Where a refugee is from and why he/she is being resettled can lead to a smooth integration or the opposite. The politicization of the migration of refugee populations began as early as the beginning of the 20th century in the U.S. when nativist views were birthed out of previously settled immigrants from northern and western Europe seeing newly settled immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as a threat to the U.S (McBrien, 2005).

Anti-refugee sentiment resurfaced after the implementation of the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965, which brought an influx of massive immigration from

Southeast Asia and, subsequently, an increased diversification of ethnicities and backgrounds. Refugees fleeing the Vietnam War, as well as the arrival of hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants from the Caribbean and Central America, spurred a nationalism and English-only movement (McBrien, 2005).

The U.S. is experiencing a similar phenomenon in present times as unprecedented numbers of Syrian refugees flood Europe. Increased fears of terrorist attacks and compromised national security have given rise to another wave of anti-refugee, and more specifically anti-Arab, sentiment that has fueled nativist and populist movements in recent years.

The acceptance or rejection refugees face upon being resettled into the U.S. can also depend on whether they were part of anticipatory or acute refugee movements, the two primary descriptors of refugee flight described in the Introduction. Kunz (1973) provides examples of refugee groups that experienced little resistance when integrating due to various factors. These groups included the first wave of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in the early-1970's. Most Vietnamese who arrived during this period were well-educated professionals with academically successful children that allowed them to fit into the "Asian model minority" stereotype. Another group that experienced relative ease when integrating was the eastern Europeans fleeing persecution during the Cold War. This refugee population shared enough cultural and ethnic similarities with U.S. natives and could oftentimes locate relatives and friends who had been resettled in the country previously. Many recent refugee groups, however, are part of acute refugee movements, wherein refugees tend to arrive in greater numbers and with less education. Refugee groups that are a part of these movements have a more difficult time blending into U.S. society and face more barriers to integration as a result.

Each wave of anti-immigrant sentiment directly affects the experience of refugees already settled in the U.S. and can lead to incidents of discrimination. This discrimination, carries over to U.S. classrooms where students often feel marginalized by their peers, teachers, and curriculum. Mistreatment can be both direct and subtle. Refugee students are directly discriminated against when they are harassed by fellow students or treated unfairly by teachers because of their background. More nuanced discrimination is manifested in school curriculum and policy, which, though meant to promote integration and acculturation, can oftentimes work towards the erasure of a refugee student's culture and be English-only and anti-foreign in nature.

McBrien (2005) offers several examples of the discrimination of specific refugee groups in a U.S. school context. One group that finds it particularly difficult to escape persecution is Muslim refugees. Post-September 11th, many Americans began to equate the Muslim faith with terrorism. Because many female Muslim students wear a hijab and are thus unable to hide their faith, this stigmatized part of their identity spurs rejection from their peers and contributes to feelings of rejection and exclusion. Carter (1999) conducted research that reinforces the fact that U.S.-born schoolchildren bully Muslim students for public displays of their religion, like wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan, as well as for their Arab names. He also reported that Muslim students had to defend themselves from accusations of being called terrorists by their U.S.-born peers.

Another stark example of discrimination against refugee groups stems from the work of Lee (2002), who studied Hmong refugees in a Wisconsin high school. Lee found that Hmong refugees were deemed as "not only educationally different but deficient and inferior to mainstream students." Both students and teachers saw the culture and behavior of Hmong students "backwards" simply because they were Southeast Asian. Oftentimes, these students

were even grouped with other minority groups, such as African American and Hispanics, and perceived as not valuing education. This bullying and mistreatment led Hmong students to cling to their status as Americans and distance themselves from recent Hmong arrivals. In this situation, it became clear to Hmong refugees that to be at the top of the academic and social hierarchy, one need only be White.

Lastly, Trueba and colleagues (1990) found that discrimination against refugee students often permeates the teachers, administrators, and curricula of a school. They conducted a 2-year study of an elementary school in southern California and reported that teachers and administrators of this school saw the school's refugee populations, made up of primarily Central American and Southeast Asian students, as culturally and educationally inferior to U.S.-born students. Educators also saw their refugee students as having low intelligence and learning disabilities, despite the fact that neither they nor school psychologists could diagnose the perceived disabilities. Trueba and colleagues found that one of the primary criteria for being labeled as learning disabled was an inability to communicate well in English. This pointed to a larger curriculum issue in the school, which operated under an English-only policy. Harsh treatment of these students, as well as the English-only requirement, had profound effects on the refugee populations in this school, who were depressed, panicked, and isolated. As they were unable to demonstrate the thorough understanding of American language and culture that their teachers expected of them in the classroom, students began to see themselves as dumb and some even spoke of killing themselves. While much of the discrimination refugee students face comes from fellow students, this example exposes the profound impact lack of understanding and empathy at the administrator and educator level can have on refugee student populations.

These examples, though specific in their focus and ranging from elementary schools to high schools across the U.S., speak to how discrimination, bullying, and biased treatment from peers, teachers, administrators, and curricula can negatively affect the educational experience of refugee students. Some refugee groups can more easily blend into and adapt to American culture, and others turn to searching for effective ways to distance themselves from their refugee peers to quicken integration and avoid discrimination targeting refugee populations. Many refugees, however, belong to populations that are unable to hide their refugee status and are thus stigmatized for their identity and perceived state of being "less than" in comparison to U.S. born students.

B. *Language Acquisition*

Much of the research pertaining to English-language acquisition in U.S. schools does not specifically address refugees and instead applies more broadly to students from countries where the language was not English. However, all studies reviewed by McBrien came to a similar conclusion: immigrant students who had a better grasp on the English language performed better in U.S. schools and those who struggled with English (or even had a heavy accents) were more likely to be ridiculed and experience more difficulties throughout their educational journeys. Lack of English proficiency can lead to discrimination, academic struggles, miscommunication between students and teachers, and loss of culture.

Nicassio (1983), who studied alienation amongst Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian refugees, found that there was a strong correlation between insufficient English proficiency and feelings of alienation. Those refugees who exhibited higher English-language proficiency, which were the Laotian and Vietnamese participants, experienced less alienation

than their Hmong and Cambodian peers, who demonstrated lower levels of English proficiency. Pryor's study (2001) of Bosnian, Albanian, and other refugee/immigrant groups in a Michigan city supported Nicassio's findings, as refugee and immigrant students perceived English acquisition as necessary for future success in the U.S. This was due in part to students experiencing ridicule, harassment, and embarrassment at the hands of their U.S.-born peers because they did not possess superior English proficiency. Oftentimes, language-based bullying causes refugee students learning English to feel shame and become silent to avoid further mistreatment based on their speaking ability. This alienation and inclination towards reclusiveness is exacerbated by the structure of ESL classrooms, which are regularly separated from mainstream classes and U.S.-born students. Estrangement from English-speaking peers prevents refugee students from learning the slang of their peers and developing the ability to communicate effectively with American students.

Cheng (1998) and Allen (2002) wrote about the problems associated with differences between proficiency in colloquial English and proficiency in academic English. Academic English is the language of instruction that is used to teach curriculum in U.S. classrooms. For example, there is a difference between asking a student to explain the causes of an event and asking a student to "list the factors" that led to an event. Many refugee students develop proficiency in colloquial English through regular interaction with their peers, but continue to fall behind in developing an understanding of academic English. This prompts educators to place refugee students in special education classes or on lower academic tracks despite their authentically high academic ability. Additionally, Cheng identified several cultural differences, including unexpected nonverbal expressions, embarrassment over praise, and short response, that teachers regularly misinterpreted as deficiencies in the student's academic ability. A teacher's

lack of understanding of his/her refugee students' cultures and experiences can discourage student success and impede the acquisition of English-language proficiency and academic skills.

Lastly, Olsen (2000) examined the psychosocial consequences of both schools and refugee/immigrant parents pushing their non-native students to learn English. For many refugees, she explains, the acquisition of English proficiency is synonymous with belonging to U.S. culture. Oftentimes, however, students and their families discover that learning English is often accompanied by the loss of a refugee student's home language use, development, and fluency. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) supported this phenomenon through their research that studied the effectiveness of schools that prioritized English immersion. Ultimately, the pair was critical of schools that used this policy for their English instruction as it had the potential to promote loss of the student's native language while also failing to fully attain sufficient English-language proficiency. They also targeted the phrase "bilingual education," which provides a false portrayal of most English language instruction. "Bilingual" instruction, they argue, rarely intends to promote fluency in two languages, but instead relies on the foreign language as a crutch only until refugee students have attained a level of English proficiency sufficient for placement in mainstream monolingual classes.

C. *Parental Involvement and Support*

While parental support and involvement in the education of their refugee student(s) is an important factor in the promotion of student success in U.S. classrooms, many parents are ill-equipped to help facilitate their child's integration due to cultural differences, speed of integration, and cultural dissonance between parents and their children. Timm (1994) conducted a study that involved interviewing a group of Hmong men and women regarding several

educational and family values. She found that Hmong refugee parents failed to have an appropriate frame-of-reference for understanding the concept of parent-teacher conferences. Many Hmong parents were also confused by the U.S. education system, as they expected the classroom to be a controlled environment where memorization was the primary means of instruction and was synonymous with learning. Additionally, they, as well as Southeast Asians more generally, saw teachers as the sole experts of their children's education and did not grasp the expectation that they were meant to be involved with the education of their children.

Some refugee students face the added burden of reconciling intergenerational conflicts and cultural dissonance between themselves and their parents. Intergenerational conflict stems from refugee students entering a new culture in school and balancing that with their parent's native culture at home. The constant switching between the culture of their peers and that of their parents can contribute to confusion of identity for refugee youth. This crisis of identity is exacerbated by the American school environment, which many refugee students see as placing few behavioral rules on them in comparison to their harsher and stricter pre-U.S. schools. The perceived freedom in their school environment contributes to discipline problems for some students. Ascher (1985) argued that behavioral issues stemmed from adjustment difficulties and incidents of discrimination and prejudice by their U.S.-born classmates that spurred students to attempt assimilation into their school environment rapidly. Refugee students' efforts to fit into their new school culture often led to cultural dissonance between their school life and family life, as well as feelings of resentment and alienation from their parents.

Many refugee students must also confront dissonant acculturation, where parents lag behind their children's acquisition of the host country language and integration into the host country's culture. Parents may experience a loss of control, as well as a crisis of identity as their

children are forced to take on adult roles, such as translation, on their behalf. Cultural dissonance contributes to family conflict and distance between refugee children and parents. Eventually, students may feel like they do not have a place at either school or home, as they become distanced from their parents and yet are never fully accepted by their classmates (McBrien, 2005).

D. *Policy, Research, and Educational Groupings*

For many years, literature in the field of migration has failed to distinguish the experiences of refugee students as different from those of other migrant groups. Both education policy-makers and researchers have ignored the specific needs of refugee students and instead continued to focus on general migrant and multicultural education. As a result, there has been an absence of targeted policies and organizational frameworks that confront and rectify the clear disadvantages refugee students face in the context of a U.S. classroom. Even as refugee education has begun to receive increased attention in recent years, refugees, who themselves come from a diverse array of countries, cultures, hardships, and experiences, are treated as a homogenous group. This prevents both educators and policy-makers from conducting a detailed examination of both pre- and post-migration factors, such as those discussed in this chapter.

Though there exists little research about the educational policies and individualized attention given to refugee populations in U.S. classrooms, scholars from both the UK and Australia have begun to distinguish themselves as leaders in this field. In Sidhu and Taylor's study (2012) of refugee educational policy in Australia, they reinforced the idea that refugee needs are rarely addressed with specific policies. Instead, refugees were either ignored completely or treated as synonymous with other migrant groups. Pinson and Arnot (2007)

reported that the UK handled the education of their refugee populations in a similar way. Not only does the UK government fail to address the needs of refugee students with specific policy, but the country's schools tend to only concentrate on ESL issues, instead of the learning, social, and emotional needs of their students. Additionally, Rutter (2006) criticized the overwhelming tendency of researchers and educators to focus on the trauma experiences of refugees at the expense of understanding their educational experiences. In her study, she reports that 76% of the studies she references were "psychological research monographs about trauma." This focus on trauma, Rutter argues, discouraged a genuine analysis of their backgrounds and experiences and ultimately masked the importance of post-migration experiences, such as "poverty, isolation, racism, and uncertain migration status."

Regarding the U.S., McBrien's work (2005) provides a brief insight into the state of research and policy targeting the educational needs of refugee students. He states that there exists insufficient research that separates the needs and experiences of refugee students from immigrants more generally. He reinforces the idea through his research that refugees and other immigrants are considerably different. Because of this, more comparative studies that thoroughly elucidate the differences between the two groups must be conducted to provide teachers, administrators, and policymakers with the information needed to differentiate teaching and services to these groups. McBrien's own research relies on generalizations, as most of the studies in his literature review address panethnic groupings, such as Asians, Southeast Asians, Indochinese, or even broader categories, such as refugees and immigrants. While these more general studies provide a needed introduction to understanding refugee educational experiences, McBrien emphasizes the importance of researching the specific needs of individual refugee groups, especially those that arrived in the U.S. post-1990.

Chapter 4 – Refugee Experiences in Austin Independent School District (AISD)

A refugee's pre- and post-migration experiences come to a head in the classrooms of local school districts. To understand the practical implications of the theoretical underpinnings of refugee education discussed in the previous chapter, I conducted a study of refugee student experiences in the Austin Independent School District (AISD). My research involved discussing the specific needs of refugee students in AISD, as well as the common challenges they face within the classroom, with outside service providers. I conducted interviews with three women employed at three different non-profits in the Austin area. The non-profits with which I collaborated were Interfaith Action of Central Texas (iACT), Amaanah Refugee Services, and GirlForward. These organizations provide vital services, such as mentorship, language support, and academic tutoring, to the refugee students of AISD, filling in gaps that the schools are unable to fill themselves.

I focused on AISD as a grounding framework through which to better understand firsthand how refugee students navigated their academic experiences at a local level and what one school district was doing to meet the needs of this growing population. As a city that continues to resettle large numbers of refugee families from diverse countries of origin, many of the obstacles and challenges mentioned in research done previously apply directly to refugee student experiences in AISD.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, AISD has a Refugee Family Support Center that tracks AISD's refugee students and provides services to them throughout their academic journey in Austin. AISD, however, has restrictions on undergraduate students conducting research within AISD schools and institutions, so I was unable to interview the refugee family coordinator or gather data from her office. Overall, AISD public and private data pertaining to the academic

performance and progress of its refugee students is sparse, which makes forming conclusions about the school district's treatment of refugee students unrealistic for any researcher, undergraduate student or otherwise. This lack of data will be addressed further in the Conclusion.

This study examined refugee service providers' perceptions of AISD schools as a whole, rather than focusing on specific approaches, climates, and initiatives at individual schools. Additionally, I address AISD's refugee populations at the aggregate, rather than by individual ethnic group. As my interviews focused on the perceptions and reports of secondary service providers, all accounts of refugee experiences are secondhand rather than from the students themselves. I will reference the three service providers using the following identifier: "*Organization* Interviewee" to retain anonymity (i.e. iACT Interviewee, Amaanah Interviewee, GirlForward Interviewee).

As research chronicling the complex experiences of refugees in U.S. classrooms are sparse, this study grants an inside look at refugee educational experiences from the community workers who interact with this population regularly. Because non-profits partner with AISD to meet specific needs of schools in the district, employees of these organizations are especially attuned to challenges facing refugee student populations as well as shortcomings of the school district. This chapter will provide a brief description of the specific services provided to refugees of AISD by iACT, Amaanah Refugee Services, and GirlForward. It will then outline some reported challenges and needs of refugees in AISD schools, synthesizing insight provided by the three service providers interviewed as a foundation.

iACT, Amaanah Refugee Services, and GirlForward

The primary means through which iACT partners with AISD and interacts with refugee students is through its iLearn program. iLearn is a summer camp started 10 years ago that offers out-of-school instruction to refugee kids from ages 6-18 that supplements the AISD programs provided throughout the year. As some refugee youth may have just arrived in the U.S. and have never attended an American school – or any school at all – previously, this program is an opportunity for them to learn English and develop school skills, such as organization, note-taking, and homework planning. The summer program is run by an AISD teacher. After the summer concludes, this teacher is retained part-time to maintain contact with all the kids who took part in iLearn to see if they have successfully navigated their academic experiences. iACT staff pull their grades, refer them to after-school programs, and talk regularly with their teachers. In recent years, this organization has developed an even closer partnership with AISD and initiated a shift to working more with high schoolers as they are perceived to be AISD's most vulnerable refugee population. This shift is accompanied by a mentorship program, which involves iACT matching two mentors to every one student. These mentors visit their mentee at his/her house two days a week to assist with homework and other academic needs (iACT, 2017).

Amaanah Refugee Services was established in Houston, Texas and has since expanded to Austin beginning in September 2016. Since coming to Austin, Amaanah has partnered exclusively with AISD to provide educational and social support to refugee students in elementary or middle school. The organization is present at different campuses Monday through Friday and offers services in both an in-school and after-school setting. During school hours, Amaanah hires instructors to provide either "push-in" or "pull-out" support to refugee students. This support is supplemental to the services already offered to refugee students by AISD. Push-

in support, which is additional instruction within the student's normal classes, is given to students who have the language ability to remain in a traditional classroom with U.S.-born students but might require some additional instructional support in certain areas. The Amaanah instructor acts as a teacher's assistant who supports all students in the classroom, but dedicates extra time and effort to keeping track of the needs of the refugee students. If a refugee student is not fit to fully integrate into the classroom, the Amaanah offers "pull-out" services which entails instructors working with students outside of traditional classrooms in a refugee-only setting. Typically, there are two to three students to every one instructor. Additionally, the non-profit hosts after-school tutoring at two elementary schools that involves approximately two hours of homework help, recreational activity, and general academic enrichment (Amaanah Refugee Services, 2017).

GirlForward serves refugee girls enrolled in AISD high schools through its mentoring program and Camp GirlForward. As part of its mentoring program, GirlForward facilitates a one-on-one relationship between a volunteer mentor and a refugee girl. Mentoring is year-round and mentors are required to meet with mentees once a week. Camp GirlForward is a summer education program focused primarily on English language learning. This camp lasts 6 weeks, with girls meeting every day of the week. Oftentimes, the same students who participate in Camp GirlForward are the students who then become mentees within the mentorship program. Like iLearn, this camp is another form of external instructional support that supplements already existing AISD services (GirlForward, 2017).

A. Refugees as Individuals with Diverse Experiences

"*It's important to look at them as individuals and to see what their issues are and not just try to fit them into this mold that's already too crooked for even American kids...*"

-iACT Interviewee

As discussed in Chapter 3, refugees entering local schools have experienced a wide variety of academic circumstances that may affect their performance in a U.S. classroom. One of the major challenges for AISD refugee students, as reported by the groups that assist them, is the tendency of teachers and administrators to treat refugees as a homogenous group and thereby to overlook the individualized needs of each student. This observation reflects national research, which points to a general trend of not only local educators, but also nationally-focused researchers and policy-makers, treating refugees as a homogenous group harboring experiences common to other migrant groups. This monolithic grouping, research states, prevents any thorough understanding of the uniqueness of refugee pre-migration experiences and post-migration needs from being reached (McBrien, 2005).

Not only does the uniqueness of a refugee's pre-migration experiences impact his/her access to education, but his/her cultural and linguistic upbringing affects his/her ability to understand classroom content and integrate effectively into the classroom environment. The iACT Interviewee summarized this situation in the following way:

> *The refugee kids [in AISD have]…been in hundreds of different situations and living situations. They've come from schools that have been nonexistent, to schools that may have been pretty good, to no schools at all. So, their needs are very different. Their background and their knowledge is very different. People who speak a language, for example, that has the letters of the alphabet as English, like Swahili, for example, it maybe a little easier for them to learn English than those who speak Farsi or Arabic, because you're learning something completely different. Plus, what's focused in different countries is very different. And so, unless you know the detail from that child and from that family, or you've learned about that country with a place that child is in, you don't*

> *know what their needs are and you may see the gaps, but, again, you don't know the cultural needs as well.*

According to the iACT Interviewee, AISD has attempted to implement a training that prepares teachers for the individualized needs of refugee populations. This training, however, does not offer the structural support that would be necessary to provide adequate individualized attention to refugee students. The Amaanah Interviewee reinforced this idea, saying:

> *I think sometimes, as well intended as a teacher may be, they might not understand the situation that a refugee child is coming from or why they might have certain behaviors or certain gaps in learning. And so, I know that the district does a really good job of trying to provide educational opportunities for teachers. But, the reality is teachers have a lot on their plate and teachers are not trained necessarily to be specialists in this area. So, I think it can be overwhelming inside the classroom to try to support these children in the appropriate way when they have a group of 18 other students that have to be on level for testing.*

The iACT and Amaanah Interviewees expressed the sentiment that, due to a general tendency of AISD educators and administrators to overlook the individual experiences and needs of its refugee students, the likelihood of a school sufficiently supporting the academic needs of refugees in the classroom is unlikely. This struggle to understand and fulfill the unique needs of refugee students is consistent with McBrien's (2005) research, which emphasizes the lack of understanding of refugee experiences and the need for teachers to differentiate the services they provide to U.S.-born students and those they provide to refugee students.

B: *Discrimination*

"If there are issues or if there are clashes, refugees are blamed because they're from a different culture and their culture is not necessarily understood."

-iACT Interviewee

When refugee students enter a local classroom, they carry their status as "refugee" with them. Escaping this label, as well as the many other complex labels refugees shoulder (e.g.

"foreigner," "Muslim," "outsider," etc.), may be difficult. Because they stand out as "the other" and draw attention due to their immigration status, refugees reportedly become targets of bullying and biased treatment. Based on the accounts from interviewees, much of the discrimination that occurs in AISD schools targets certain religious groups, especially Muslims, or transpires between specific ethnic groups. Both the iACT and the Amaanah Interviewees recalled specific instances of discrimination against Muslim students and girls who wear a traditional hijab that have prevented these students' integration into their school environment:

> *If [the students] see a girl who wears a scarf all the time they think, "OK, what are you hiding? Obviously you're a terrorist." There have been instances where kids have snatched the hijab off the girls head and run down the hall and then the girls break down crying. So, there's so much cultural misunderstanding and lack of communication.*
>
> *…if there are clear cultural differences -- for example, if there's a third grader wearing a hijab, then there is a longer process of integration into the school community.*

Interviewees attribute instances of discrimination to "lack of cultural understanding" between different student populations belonging to varying cultural or religious backgrounds. Every instance of discrimination discussed by interviewees involved Muslim students, indicating that this demographic of refugee students, because of the current political environment and public nature of their faith, may face increased mistreatment compared to other refugee groups present in AISD schools.

According to the iACT Interviewee, this discrimination and lack of cultural understanding may lead to more violent altercations between certain refugees and other immigrant groups. She reports incidents where Iraqi refugees have clashed with Hispanic students. The iACT Interviewee described these conflicts, saying:

> *There have been issues, for example, with Iraqi kids clashing with Hispanic kids. It's all cultural misunderstandings, but I think because of the present environment of anti-Muslim sentiment and all of that, people are fast to blame the Muslim kids, which may not always be – sometimes it may be their fault – but it's not necessarily always their*

fault… It has happened in the past and it's usually that -- that Hispanics in their culture, they're more outspoken, they're probably louder, they are more rambunctious, while Iraqis also have come, remember, from a civil war where they already come with a chip on their shoulder and they're looking out to see who is out to get them. So, they misunderstand the culture completely. And it goes to clashes because now there are bigger groups of each one and that's happened in several schools, actually.

These observations allude to how pre-migration experiences and differences in cultural upbringing can lead to more serious bullying and misunderstanding. The iACT Interviewee's commentary also reinforces existing research, which highlights discrimination targeting Muslim refugees as being particularly harsh since September, 11th. U.S.-born or non-refugee students may be quick to make judgements about refugee students based on racial or religious stereotypes (e.g. Arabs and Muslims are terrorists), who are often unable to hide the "otherness" that is associated with their skin color or religious practices (McBrien, 2005).

C. *Lack of Environment for Comfortable Learning*

"Everybody there is an immigrant or a refugee. So, everybody there is in the same boat. They can fit into that environment more easily because everybody's an outsider."

-iACT Interviewee

One of the most prevalent themes present throughout my discussions was the need for an environment separate from traditional classrooms that facilitates refugee student integration into AISD schools and American culture more generally. One such example of this environment that already exists within AISD is International High School (IHS). IHS is a high school with an exclusive enrollment of bilingual or multilingual students from the ages of 14 to 16. After two years at IHS, students make the transition to their home high school, where they will remain for the remainder of their high school tenure. To enroll at IHS, students must not have been settled in the United States for over a year nor have been previously enrolled in another school within

the country. Demographically, the school consists of mostly Hispanic (86.1%), Asian (5.1%), and African American (4.8%) students, with 96.6% of them identified as economically disadvantaged (Austin ISD, 2017, IHS).

Although this school provides refugee and immigrant support for two years, refugees must still make the difficult transition from IHS to their area schools after their time at the school has finished. This transition is smoother than the transition from no schooling/limited schooling straight into a traditional AISD school, but, according to the iACT Interviewee, many refugees still find the shift in school culture jarring. The interviewee described IHS and students' experiences post-IHS, saying:

> *That's one of the things that [iACT has] always been trying to push for in Austin…for them to have a place where they can ask questions and learn gradually. The International High School is such a place. Everybody there is an immigrant or a refugee. So, everybody there is in the same boat. They can fit into that environment more easily because everybody's an outsider. We're all outsiders. We are all OK together. But at the other schools, you have this click of people who are already connected and already know how to act socially and all that. And so, you become the outsider and you don't know how to how to connect. So, International High School is a good place for that. But they're there for two years and then they're thrown back into their area schools. And so, they're starting from scratch again.*

Some parents resist sending their students to IHS. IHS is the only school of its nature that exists in AISD and its location is in East Austin, far from most refugee families' places of residence. Though AISD recommends that refugee families enroll their children in this school, many parents do not understand the need for their child to take two buses to attend a school far away when their area school is down the street. The message of the benefits of IHS compared to other campuses, service providers say, becomes difficult to convey to families.

The Amaanah Interviewee reinforced the idea that refugee students in AISD primary schools tend to be more comfortable in academic environments that are refugee-only spaces and separate from U.S.-born students. The interviewee reported that refugee youth not only make

friends with fellow refugees more quickly, but they are also "more fearless in terms of answering questions, making mistakes, and moving forward" in their studies. The iACT Interviewee, along with other service providers in the Austin area, have advocated for a "Welcoming Newcomers Center" that not only provides vital resources for refugee families as they transition into life in the U.S., but also educates refugee students entering school at all levels. The Center was described in the following way:

> *You go to the center to register all of your children. Your children are there for maybe a year or two depending on where we're talking about. But ideally, as long as they need it. They're tested and you know what their gaps are. They are taught towards those gaps so that they can catch up with the grade level that they're going to go into. They can stay for a year or two. They're taught cultural education. They're instructed about how schools work and it's in a protected environment where everybody is in the same boat. Once they're ready, then they go into their school and they're helped a little bit in the transitional period, but then they know what to expect and they're not just thrown into the deep water, as is the case right now. So, that's the hope, that we can we can do that, because in one place you can evaluate children and plus you get the story from the parents, that [their] kid had no school for three years*

Approval for the establishment of this type of school, however, has been difficult to secure in AISD. The iACT Interviewee is not optimistic that any other options besides IHS will exist for refugee students to integrate into Austin schools gradually post-arrival anytime soon. For now, they must either attend IHS for a limited amount of time or brave area schools that may be less attuned and equipped to meet the specific needs of refugee students.

D. *Bilingual and ESL Education*

"…[a student] had said that he's not doing well in English because he doesn't know Spanish…"

-iACT Interviewee

Regarding refugee students' linguistic education in AISD, all interviewees report widespread difficulties in schools meeting the needs of a refugee population with diverse

linguistic backgrounds. AISD's English as a Second Language (ESL) classes contain both refugee students and students belonging to other migrant groups. According to interviewees, these classes are often dominated by immigrant students who only speak Spanish. For context, 85% of AISD ELLs report speaking Spanish as their primary language spoken at home (Orr, 2016). This contributes to a perception that teachers providing English language instruction often rely heavily on Spanish. Interviewees reported that some refugees experienced increased difficulty acquiring English because of this trend. One elaborated on this issue by saying:

> *…teachers in ESL classes are, a lot of times, teaching to the Hispanics in their class because that's the majority of their ESL students. So… a lot of the teachers in ESL classes – they can resort to Spanish easily to translate things or make things simpler to students, which makes it all the more difficult for students who do not speak Spanish.*

Though this obstacle is primarily reported as being an issue for non-Spanish speakers, the Amaanah Interviewee spoke of how support for Arabic-speaking refugees was also prioritized over those refugees who spoke more obscure languages. Some schools may have signs up in the hallway in Arabic or hire an instructor to support Arabic-speaking individuals. While there exists no easy solution to meeting the linguistic demands of a student population speaking 100+ languages, interviewees clearly expressed a belief that AISD schools would never adequately meet the academic and linguistic needs of its refugee students if they prioritized instruction in one language over others (Orr, 2016).

E. *School Structures and Requirements*

"*I have been teaching English as a second language all of my life and I will tell you for a fact any kid who arrives here as a teenager – there's no way in hell he can pass that test."*

-iACT Interviewee

Two of the three interviewees emphasized the unrealistic expectations placed on refugee students by local school districts and individual schools. These expectations, which are institutional in nature and often symptoms of larger problems within the U.S. education system, generate more challenges for refugee students that extend beyond just the classroom. The first relates to the grade at which a refugee begins when first enrolling in a U.S. school. As is the case in school districts across the nation, AISD refugees must enter the grade level that corresponds with their age, regardless of previous educational experience. As a result, refugee students enter classrooms that force them to complete work that is far beyond their academic abilities. The iACT Interviewee gave the following example to describe this challenge:

> *So, if you have a 14-year-old refugee, they will go into 9th grade, and that child could have one or two years of schooling, but it doesn't matter. They'll still go into the 9th grade where they're going to get all of the material that a 9th grader would get and that is more than they're able to do. They get ESL classes, but it's more like one or two classes and they still have to do the same materials, the same stuff, that other kids who know English are doing. It's really difficult because they also don't try to fill the gaps these children have had.*

Despite these increased challenges, the school district, like others throughout the state and the nation, expects refugee students to meet the same graduation and testing standards as their U.S.-born peers in the same grade.

These standards raise another point of contention for the interviewees, who raised standardized testing, which is currently STAAR testing in Texas, as representing an impossible benchmark for refugees to meet. This test, which has iterations for reading, mathematics, writing, science, and social studies depending on school grade, are not hospitable to students who are learning English as a second language. Due to cultural and linguistic intricacies that are only understandable and recognizable to U.S.-born students, most, if not all, refugees experience

difficulties comprehending and passing the tests. The iACT Interviewee raised this obstacle as the most unrealistic for a refugee to overcome:

> *Standardized testing is a catastrophe because refugees – they cannot pass it. I'm an ESL teacher, I have been teaching English as a second language all of my life and I will tell you for a fact any kid who arrives here as a teenager – there's no way in hell he can pass that test. There's no way. They ask for too many intricate details – not just cultural, language. You know, complex language interpretation and just the layers of meaning within words that are expected to be understood don't work with people who speak English as a second language badly… Teachers can support them with their class work, but when it comes to STAAR tests, it's not possible.*

Without passing STAAR testing, refugee students are unable to graduate, which creates problems for both the students and individual schools. For students, the obstacle is clear: moving on to the next grade level or graduation from secondary school is impossible. In relation to schools, this challenge is more complicated. The amount of funding a school receives from the state and federal government to support the education of ELLs and migrant populations is connected to several factors, one of them being the number of students a school graduates (Austin ISD, 2016). If refugee students are unable to pass their STAAR tests and graduate, schools risk losing funding, which is already scarce at some AISD schools. This leads some schools to teach low-performing students toward the STAAR test instead of following traditional curriculum.

The iACT Interviewee also described "schools within schools" that provide instruction geared towards STAAR testing and credit recovery. One such example is the Graduation Preparatory Academy at Lanier High School. AISD schools dis-enroll refugee students from traditional schools and enroll them in these sub-schools (Austin ISD, 2017, GPA at Lanier) Thus, if a refugee fails to meet state standards and pass their required standardized tests, the failing student counts towards the graduation rate of the sub-school and not the traditional area school. These institutional pressures may lead to strategies that result in less rigorous academic

preparation for refugee students. This method runs the risk of ignoring the academic needs of refugee students for the sake of performance standards. It also treats refugee students as problems that must be offloaded to other, less academically substantive, institutions.

Lastly, the amount of support – in the guise of human resources and materials each AISD school receives for their refugee populations – affects the quantity and quality of services these schools can provide to refugee students. Because funding differs from school to school, supplemental services differ as well. This lack of continuity between schools regarding how refugees are supported is one of the primary grievances raised by interviewees. Although school funding impacts all students, regardless of migrant status, refugees are acutely affected due to their reliance on services, such as ESL instruction and integration initiatives, that are supplemental in nature. The iACT and Amaanah Interviewees addressed this issue, saying:

> *You know, on the one hand, you want things to be individualized and target individuals, but on the other hand you also want some uniformity… So, if there's a good thing that one school does, if it's possible to have that at all the schools at that level, wouldn't it be nice? But it's not the case…The differences between schools, whether you're in a poor district or in an advantaged district, is how much money you have and what you do with that money and who are the teachers who are teaching there, how good they are -- all this influences how you deal with different students.*

> *I think part of [the differences between schools] is based on the funding. Some of the schools are able to have a special teacher or instructional coach to work with the students and that's obviously very helpful. But if the budget doesn't allow for that, that is not a position that's required by any means… I'd also add that different campuses emphasize working with refugee students in different ways…Maybe the family is worked with a little more closely on some campuses. We have a school that does a monthly coffee specifically for refugee parents, which obviously lends itself to a more inclusive environment.*

While much of this chapter's discussion has centered on the linguistic, academic, and social challenges refugees face within AISD schools, these observations transcend classrooms and allude to larger systemic issues within Texas's education system. According the interviewees, the most glaring of these is the unrealistic expectations placed on refugee students

by state performance standards and STAAR testing. For refugee students who have had limited to no education before resettling in the U.S., learning English, acclimating to the environment of American schools, then meeting the same academic expectations as their U.S.-born peers represents a system that dooms them to fail from the start.

F. Need to Fit in and Cultural Dissonance with Parents

"They're trying to protect their parents from the culture -- from realizing what it means to be a part of the United States."

-iACT Interviewee

As discussed in Chapter 3, the relationship between refugee children and their parents grows more complicated after resettlement due to a variety of post-migration factors. The first is that refugee students feel pressure to behave like their U.S.-born peers and integrate into American culture, which often alienates students' parents. Unfortunately, because refugee students are not aware of cultural norms and only have teenagers in their school setting standards of what is expected socially of them, they often succumb to outside pressures that are unhealthy or detrimental to their future development. These students are not comfortable disclosing their school behavior, which may differ drastically from their behavior at home, with their parents, which creates a larger schism between a refugee student's school self and home self (McBrien, 2005). The iACT Interview stressed this phenomenon, saying:

> *Well, the kids want to fit in. So, they want to do what their peers are doing. They want to maybe go smoke outside, or maybe they want to go party, but they can't tell the parents what they're doing because in the old culture, that was not acceptable. So, the kids are not going to confide in the parents. The parents are going by their assumptions of what their kids are or what their kids are doing. They don't know reality of what's going on. And then the kid feels protective to the parents. I mean it's not just that they're hiding it from them. They're trying to protect their parents from the culture -- from realizing what it means to be a part of the United States. So, the connection has changed, the dynamics*

> *have changed. And now the child has the responsibility for these parents not to be shocked and not to shock them and to keep them protected from what's happening outside the home. And the parents of course don't know and then maybe 10 years down the road when the son marries his girlfriend who got pregnant, then the parents are completely in shock.*

The iACT Interviewee reported that many refugee parents are also ignorant to the new struggles their children face in U.S. schools. Their child might have been first in their class in their home country and the parent expects the same results in the U.S. In reality, the child is struggling to learn English, keep up with his/her schoolwork, and integrate successfully into American culture. This creates a fissure between what parents expect from their children and what the children are realistically able to accomplish given their linguistic and academic challenges.

At the same time, refugee parents become more reliant on their children for help integrating into American culture and navigating daily life in the U.S. Because children are often the first ones in a refugee family to learn the language and culture of their host country, parents often use their children for translation assistance, which can lead to uncomfortable and complex scenarios. The iACT Interviewee described this dynamic in the following way:

> *It's a complicated thing. On the one hand, the child takes on a lot more of the family responsibilities than our children did, because that child is the one that speaks English first, learns about the culture first, is more outgoing and is more communicative. And therefore, the parent relies on them, on the children for their translation, so they use them for translation a lot. And you really don't want your 16 year old to have to explain about your poverty, to be the person who has to talk with the case manager about your needs. It is so embarrassing for a teenager to have to talk about their parents as being needy. It's just such a strange and destructive dynamic to have to have your kid in that situation.*

The pressures placed on a refugee child by both their peers at school and their parents at home fosters a cultural dissonance that makes integrating into American society and succeeding in school more taxing. Though much of this struggle occurs outside of the school environment, many of its root causes stem from a refugee student's experiences within the school environment

interacting with their peers. These dynamics are reportedly occurring for students enrolled in AISD schools and currently little work is targeted at the issue.

G. *The Numbers*

Using the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) Academic Performance Reports, one is able to better understand how refugee students are performing in relation to district and state standards. Unfortunately, neither AISD nor the state of Texas offer an indicator in their reports for refugees or immigrants, so knowing the details of this population's educational performance is impossible at this point in my research. AISD's Refugee Family Support Office has accrued data regarding the district's refugee students and their performance outcomes; however, this data is unspecific and unavailable to undergraduate researchers. The closest metric by which I am able to account for refugee performance data is the "English Language Learner" indicator. This label represents "the count and percentage of students whose primary language is other than English and who are in the process of acquiring English" (Texas Education Agency, 2017, Glossary). This means that students from all migrant groups and linguistic backgrounds are included in the ELL distinction, not refugees alone. As stated in the Methodology portion of the Introduction, the ELL indicator is used as a proxy for refugees in this study as it includes most, if not all, of AISD's refugee student population and, thus, comes closest to representing this population without division based on ethnicity or economic status.

According to the 2015-16 Texas Academic Performance Report for AISD, ELL students in the school district are performing at overwhelmingly lower standards than their peers in several categories, including STAAR performance, advanced course completion, and graduation/drop-out rates (Texas Education Agency, 2016). The Performance Report includes

statistics that show what percentage of students in several different ethnic and educational categories (e.g. White, African American, Special Ed, Economically Disadvantaged, ELL) passed the STAAR test (which is listed as performing at Level II Satisfactory or Above). In grades 3-8, as well as in high school, ELL students performed worse on the STAAR test than both district and state performance outcomes, with some subject test results being significantly lower. For example, in grade 7, district and state percentages of students receiving Level II Satisfactory or Above for the reading, math, and writing STAAR tests were 70%, 58%, 65% and 71%, 69%, 69%, respectively. The percentage of grade 7 ELL students who met the same standard for reading, math, and writing were 33%, 31%, and 26%, respectively. This disparity between district/state performance and ELL performance is less drastic in some grades, but performance outcomes always remain lower.

Additionally, the state offers data regarding the percentage of students deemed to exhibit "Postsecondary Readiness" based on their performance on STAAR testing. This category is made up of the students who "are determined to be sufficiently prepared for postsecondary success by achieving the Final Level II performance standard on two or more assessments" (Texas Education Agency, 2017, Glossary). ELL performance in this category is, as expected, much lower than district and state results. ELL percentages of students who are "postsecondary ready" never exceed 30% in any subject, with one subject, social studies, being a mere 13%. District and state standards are higher, with district percentages ranging from the 45-53% in various subjects and state percentages ranging from 41-47%. While these percentages indicate that ELL students in AISD are performing at considerably lower standards than other students in the district and state, it is necessary to remember that STAAR testing is not a satisfactory indicator of academic ability.

		State	Region 13	District	African American	Hispanic	White	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	Special Ed	Econ Disadv	ELL^
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 3														
Reading	2016	73%	77%	**76%**	60%	68%	93%	88%	90%	*	92%	41%	64%	66%
Mathematics	2016	75%	78%	**77%**	57%	71%	92%	63%	93%	*	91%	44%	68%	72%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 4														
Reading	2016	75%	77%	**76%**	61%	68%	94%	80%	91%	-	87%	40%	65%	63%
Mathematics	2016	73%	76%	**75%**	58%	68%	91%	100%	91%	-	82%	42%	65%	67%
Writing	2016	69%	71%	**72%**	57%	65%	90%	80%	92%	-	81%	37%	61%	61%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 5 **														
Reading	2016	81%	83%	**83%**	73%	77%	97%	92%	94%	*	95%	48%	74%	70%
Mathematics	2016	86%	87%	**88%**	74%	85%	96%	100%	96%	*	95%	62%	82%	84%
Science	2016	74%	76%	**77%**	62%	70%	92%	69%	90%	*	91%	43%	67%	65%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 6														
Reading	2016	69%	73%	**70%**	51%	59%	93%	*	88%	*	84%	28%	52%	43%
Mathematics	2016	72%	75%	**71%**	49%	62%	92%	*	88%	*	83%	35%	54%	50%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 7														
Reading	2016	71%	75%	**70%**	50%	59%	91%	*	89%	*	87%	30%	53%	33%
Mathematics	2016	69%	70%	**58%**	39%	50%	85%	*	90%	*	81%	31%	44%	31%
Writing	2016	69%	73%	**65%**	45%	54%	87%	*	89%	*	82%	23%	47%	26%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 8 **														
Reading	2016	87%	89%	**84%**	75%	78%	97%	89%	92%	*	92%	46%	75%	53%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above Grade 8 **														
Mathematics	2016	82%	85%	**82%**	66%	76%	95%	100%	93%	100%	92%	45%	72%	59%
Science	2016	75%	78%	**76%**	62%	66%	94%	78%	90%	*	87%	37%	63%	42%
Social Studies	2016	63%	69%	**64%**	47%	52%	89%	71%	87%	*	80%	29%	45%	25%
STAAR Percent at Level II Satisfactory Standard or Above End of Course														
English I	2016	65%	69%	**66%**	49%	58%	90%	75%	85%	*	80%	28%	54%	33%
English II	2016	67%	72%	**69%**	55%	61%	92%	64%	86%	*	84%	34%	56%	30%
Algebra I	2016	78%	80%	**83%**	67%	79%	95%	83%	96%	*	90%	47%	76%	69%
Biology	2016	87%	90%	**91%**	81%	89%	98%	100%	96%	*	95%	65%	87%	76%
U.S. History	2016	91%	93%	**92%**	87%	90%	98%	100%	97%	*	96%	58%	88%	75%
STAAR Percent at Postsecondary Readiness Standard All Grades														
Two or More Subjects	2016	45%	51%	**50%**	25%	37%	76%	46%	82%	65%	67%	10%	30%	22%
Reading	2016	46%	53%	**52%**	29%	38%	78%	45%	80%	75%	69%	11%	31%	23%
Mathematics	2016	43%	48%	**48%**	23%	36%	71%	43%	82%	50%	63%	13%	30%	28%
Writing	2016	41%	46%	**45%**	23%	33%	68%	33%	76%	*	59%	10%	27%	27%
Science	2016	47%	53%	**53%**	29%	41%	76%	48%	82%	50%	69%	13%	35%	22%
Social Studies	2016	47%	54%	**53%**	32%	42%	75%	63%	76%	*	66%	13%	35%	13%

Citation: Texas Education Agency, 2016

As was clear from the testimony of the iACT Interviewee, performing well on STAAR tests is near-impossible for migrant students, as many aspects of the test require a deep understanding of the English language and American culture.

The Performance Report also tracks the percentage of AISD ELL students who enroll in and complete Advanced/Dual-Credit Courses. I am considering this category as being indicative of a student's ability to complete and participate in advanced-level coursework as well as a student's interest in preparing for postsecondary education (data for ELL student participation in AP/IB coursework, which might have served as a marker for the same indicators, was unavailable). As was the case with STAAR performance results, ELL students in AISD are engaging with advanced classwork at considerably lower levels compared with district- and state-wide standards. While 60.9% of district students and 54.5% of state students completed advanced/dual-credit courses in the 2014-15 school year, only 31.7% of AISD's ELL student population participated in and completed this type of coursework.

	State	Region 13	District	African American	Hispanic	White	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	Special Ed	Econ Disadv	ELL^
Advanced Course/Dual Credit Course Completion (Grades 11-12)													
Any Subject													
2014-15	54.5%	58.7%	**60.9%**	42.4%	53.2%	77.4%	52.2%	81.6%	83.3%	64.3%	15.9%	49.2%	31.7%
2013-14	53.2%	57.0%	**58.9%**	40.0%	51.4%	75.5%	56.7%	77.1%	77.8%	64.9%	13.7%	46.5%	25.3%
English Language Arts													
2014-15	29.0%	35.1%	**42.6%**	25.9%	32.7%	61.8%	30.0%	65.8%	58.3%	44.5%	6.6%	28.3%	7.6%
2013-14	28.9%	35.1%	**42.2%**	23.8%	32.7%	61.1%	44.8%	61.7%	55.6%	47.5%	6.7%	28.0%	6.4%
Mathematics													
2014-15	43.8%	47.8%	**43.6%**	32.3%	37.1%	55.1%	26.3%	65.2%	60.0%	45.7%	8.6%	35.2%	22.5%
2013-14	42.4%	45.4%	**42.0%**	28.2%	34.7%	55.0%	34.6%	63.3%	37.5%	46.7%	6.3%	32.1%	13.6%
Science													
2014-15	12.7%	14.5%	**12.8%**	7.1%	8.2%	19.2%	7.7%	36.1%	18.2%	11.8%	1.4%	6.6%	1.2%
2013-14	13.4%	16.2%	**13.9%**	4.0%	8.2%	21.9%	4.5%	38.8%	25.0%	19.3%	1.8%	6.8%	2.4%
Social Studies													
2014-15	28.4%	32.9%	**42.2%**	23.5%	32.6%	61.8%	38.1%	67.6%	72.7%	49.0%	6.5%	27.3%	11.2%
2013-14	27.8%	32.1%	**40.4%**	21.7%	30.9%	59.4%	27.6%	63.6%	44.4%	48.5%	5.1%	26.2%	9.7%
Advanced Course/Dual Credit Course Completion (Grades 9-12)													
Any Subject													
2014-15	34.6%	36.8%	**36.0%**	25.7%	31.0%	46.8%	33.3%	55.7%	64.7%	39.1%	9.1%	28.7%	16.6%
2013-14	33.1%	35.4%	**34.6%**	25.3%	30.2%	43.6%	40.0%	52.0%	40.0%	38.1%	9.1%	28.4%	15.4%
English Language Arts													
2014-15	15.7%	17.5%	**22.6%**	16.5%	18.3%	31.5%	19.1%	34.5%	41.2%	22.9%	4.7%	16.9%	7.5%
2013-14	15.4%	18.0%	**23.4%**	16.5%	19.3%	32.0%	35.1%	33.8%	26.3%	24.6%	5.7%	18.0%	8.8%
Mathematics													
2014-15	19.4%	21.5%	**19.8%**	13.9%	15.5%	27.5%	11.1%	37.1%	50.0%	22.4%	3.2%	13.8%	6.9%
2013-14	18.8%	20.5%	**19.1%**	12.9%	14.4%	27.3%	16.7%	36.9%	16.7%	22.9%	2.5%	12.9%	4.2%
Science													
2014-15	5.2%	5.8%	**5.3%**	2.9%	3.2%	8.6%	2.6%	17.7%	12.5%	5.0%	0.4%	2.5%	0.4%
2013-14	5.6%	6.6%	**5.6%**	1.7%	3.1%	9.6%	2.0%	18.6%	11.1%	7.7%	0.6%	2.6%	0.7%
Social Studies													
2014-15	19.5%	23.2%	**26.0%**	14.8%	19.8%	37.5%	23.3%	45.9%	56.3%	28.1%	3.3%	16.6%	5.0%
2013-14	18.3%	21.5%	**22.1%**	12.9%	16.9%	32.2%	14.0%	39.9%	26.3%	26.3%	2.9%	14.8%	3.9%

Citation: Texas Education Agency, 2016

When looking at individual subjects, the disparity between ELL student completion and that of aggregate district percentages is even larger. In English, only 7.6% of ELL students completed coursework; in Social Studies, only 11.2%; and in Science only 1.2%. This pales to district levels of English, Social Studies, and Science advanced course completion, whose percentages totaled 42.6%, 42.2%, and 12.8%, respectively.

Lastly, the AISD Performance Report includes graduation and drop-out rates for cohorts of students who began school in 2010-11 and 2011-12 and were meant to graduate 4 years later as part of the classes of 2014 and 2015. Examination of past Performance Reports for AISD confirms that the graduation/drop-out rates for the Class of 2014 are consistent with past reports. As the vast majority (9%) of refugee youth are also ELL-identified, and separate statistics are not collected to monitor refugee student progress, the following is an approximation of refugee student achievement.

In the Class of 2014, a little over half of AISD ELL students graduated that year, while district- and state-wide 88.6% and 88.3% of students graduated, respectively. In the same year, 31.9% of ELL students dropped out, while only 6.6% of students district- and state-wide dropped out. These percentages, however, differ drastically from the Class of 2015 outcomes. While district- and state-wide graduation/drop-out rates remained relatively steady, the graduation rate of AISD ELL students jumped to 80.7% and the drop-out rate decreased to 13.2%.

	State	Region 13	District	African American	Hispanic	White	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	Special Ed	Econ Disadv	ELL^
4-Year Longitudinal Rate (Gr 9-12)													
Class of 2015													
Graduated	89.0%	92.3%	**91.7%**	87.9%	90.5%	94.7%	92.3%	95.8%	75.0%	92.2%	74.2%	89.0%	80.7%
Received GED	0.6%	0.5%	**0.4%**	0.2%	0.1%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Continued HS	4.1%	3.1%	**2.8%**	3.5%	3.3%	1.7%	0.0%	2.1%	0.0%	3.3%	13.6%	2.4%	6.1%
Dropped Out	6.3%	4.1%	**5.1%**	8.3%	6.1%	2.7%	7.7%	2.1%	25.0%	2.2%	12.2%	8.4%	13.2%
Graduates and GED	89.6%	92.8%	**92.1%**	88.2%	90.7%	95.6%	92.3%	95.8%	75.0%	94.4%	74.2%	89.2%	80.7%
Grads, GED, & Cont	93.7%	95.9%	**94.9%**	91.7%	93.9%	97.3%	92.3%	97.9%	75.0%	97.8%	87.8%	91.6%	86.8%
Class of 2014													
Graduated	88.3%	91.5%	**88.6%**	83.4%	86.0%	93.9%	81.3%	93.4%	*	90.3%	71.1%	84.7%	57.4%
Received GED	0.8%	0.7%	**1.1%**	2.0%	1.0%	1.2%	6.3%	0.6%	*	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%	0.5%
Continued HS	4.3%	3.5%	**3.7%**	4.6%	4.5%	2.0%	0.0%	2.8%	*	4.8%	14.3%	4.0%	10.2%
Dropped Out	6.6%	4.4%	**6.6%**	9.9%	8.5%	2.9%	12.5%	3.3%	*	4.8%	13.4%	10.2%	31.9%
Graduates and GED	89.1%	92.1%	**89.7%**	85.4%	87.0%	95.1%	87.5%	93.9%	*	90.3%	72.2%	85.8%	57.9%
Grads, GED, & Cont	93.4%	95.6%	**93.4%**	90.1%	91.5%	97.1%	87.5%	96.7%	*	95.2%	86.6%	89.8%	68.1%

Citation: Texas Education Agency, 2016

While it is not yet clear whether percentages for the ELL students of the Class of 2015 are outliers or are indicative of a new trend, this decided improvement is difficult to ignore. Higher rates of graduation and student retention could represent the results of recent AISD efforts to meet the needs of its ELL student population. While every interviewee emphasized that AISD had a long way to go before it would sufficiently meet the needs of its refugee students, they also held the shared the sentiment that the school district was moving in the right direction. They emphasized that schools in the district were making more of a concerted effort to facilitate the academic, social, and linguistic integration of their refugee students. I am skeptical that these recent efforts are responsible for the drastic shift in ELL student success documented in the Performance Report and understanding this progress is beyond the scope of this thesis. I do, however, believe that AISD's recent attempts to better meet the needs of their ELL and refugee populations are worth acknowledging, regardless of how much long-term impact these attempts had on AISD graduation and drop-out rates.

Conclusion

It is clear from interviewee observations that there exist a wide variety of challenges refugee students enrolled in AISD schools must overcome to achieve academic, linguistic, and social success in the school environment. Academically, external service providers discussed the lack of consideration given to the individual needs of each refugee student and their specific pre-migration experiences. While interviewees reported that students found educators and administrators were more cognizant and knowledgeable of refugee needs and the diversity of pre-migration experiences in learning environments limited to only refugee and immigrant students, these environments are often fewer in number and more difficult for students to access than traditional area schools. Additionally, interviewees stressed that demanding state and local academic standards (i.e. STAAR testing, graduation requirements) exacerbate challenges in the classroom and limit refugee students' ability to progress successfully from grade to grade. Although AISD does not report refugee-specific data, consideration of data concerning ESL students, which is partially made up of AISD's refugee student population, also reflect increased difficulty amongst this population passing the STAAR test, participating in advanced coursework, and graduating high school.

Linguistically, interviewees reported that AISD is unable to meet the needs of students who speak less-common languages, such as Swahili or Pashtu. Not only did they report a lack of breadth in school translation resources, but also a trend of ESL educators teaching toward Spanish-speaking students. As 85% of Austin ISD ELL students speak Spanish, interviewees felt that most teachers were better equipped to teach English while relying on Spanish as a support to explain vocabulary or more complicated linguistic concepts.

Socially, interviewees reported a heightened level of discrimination against refugee students, especially those students who were of Arab descent or engaged in public displays of religiosity (e.g. Muslim refugees wearing the hijab). They explained that these cultural misunderstandings and bullying contributed to increased participation in deviant behavior amongst refugee students, both as a means to fit in with their peers and avoid discrimination. As a result, service providers noted a cultural dissonance that forms between students and their parents. Because their persona at school, which is informed by ideals and behavior that might be considered more "open" than those of their native culture, differs so drastically from their persona at home amongst their parents, refugee students experience an emotional tension in their attempt to balance two conflicting selves and shield their parents from their actions at school.

This narrow body of information gathered from interviews with external service providers does, indeed, reflect many of the findings from existing research examining refugee student experiences. However, due to the limited nature of data available, as well as the lack of firsthand accounts of refugee student experiences, further research is necessary to examine how and whether AISD and other local districts meet the needs of their refugee populations.

Further research is necessary to fully address the questions posed in this thesis. While it appears that a considerable disparity exists across refugee student experiences depending on which school they attend, to better grasp the intricacies of the school district and to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the differences between refugee support on each campus, it would be useful to separate refugee educational experiences by school. Instead of treating refugees as one subject, an acknowledgement of the diversity of pre-migration experiences and a more precise study of specific refugee groups (e.g. by grade level, country of origin, ethnicity, religion, etc.) would produce more fruitful findings. Gathering firsthand testimonies from

refugee students themselves, instead of secondhand accounts from educators, administrators, or outside service providers, is also necessary to provide a stronger foundation with which to understand refugee educational experiences.

To verify and test the assertions made about any local district in interviews with external service providers, additional research is necessary to understand the degree to which teachers and administrators understand the specific needs of their refugee students and their pre-migration experiences. Research is required that examines the perspectives, experiences, and practices of educators and administrators who work with refugee students on the local level, as well as with students themselves. Such data could also be compared with study of student experiences in refugee/immigrant-only learning environments, such as International High School, as such environments are designed to offer individualized attention with greater consideration of refugee and immigrant students' pre-migration experience. Such inquiry would examine whether and how AISD's area schools work to meet the individualized needs of refugee students, and if refugee-only environments better support successful integration. Further research is necessary to examine refugee student experiences in ESL and bilingual education classrooms to gain a more complete understanding of the linguistic and academic experiences of refugee students who speak lesser known languages, and the use of Spanish-focused teaching methods.

International High School, which is presented as a possible solution to many of the academic, social, and linguistic obstacles facing refugees in AISD, has certain limitations. Because there exists one campus that is far from many of Austin's refugee living centers, only a fraction of Austin refugees has access to the school. However, if the IHS model were expanded and implemented across AISD, more refugee students would have access to its unique academic environment. This expansion does not necessarily entail the establishment of additional IHS

campuses, but could instead involve the implementation of IHS services in already existing AISD schools. Services may include the creation of pull-out classrooms for refugee students that fulfill the more individualized needs of refugee students and promote a specialized learning environment where refugees feel more comfortable. For the implementation of an educational program of this nature to become a reality, national, state, and local governments must acknowledge the importance of strengthening support for refugee students and allocate more funds to ensure its successful establishment and maintenance.

Additionally, a more thorough survey of refugee student experiences with school-based discrimination could improve understanding of the social environment students face outside of the classroom. Understanding the experiences of individual refugee groups, specifically those belonging to populations that interviewees report being targeted with greater frequency, such as Arab and Muslim students has the potential to improve the provision of services and development of programs for refugee youth. Direct conversations with refugee students is necessary to grasp how social experiences schools affect their behavior, as well as their social and psychological integration. With interviewee observations suggesting a trend of refugees conforming to deviant behavior and experiencing emotional stress when attempting to balance the disparity between school and home personae, interviews would help elucidate the extent to which a refugee student's social experiences at school affect their personal life and relationships.

In general, the dearth of U.S. academic research studying refugee education involves extended case studies that address the experiences of a specific refugee group at one elementary, middle, or high school across the country. Additionally, much of this research conflates refugee experiences with those of other immigrant groups and treats all migrants as a monolithic entity without substantial distinction made between the unique experiences of each group. Research

that attempts to explore this topic in a more expansive and far-reaching fashion, speaking to the major overarching obstacles facing refugee students at the national, state, and local levels, only exists in the United Kingdom and Australia. While it is evident that this field of research is growing in the U.S., no significant advances will be made in improving refugee student experiences in U.S. schools if policy-makers, school administrators, and educators are not well-informed by sound academic research.

Lastly, if as a society we hope to improve the experiences and outcomes of refugee and other immigrant students, resources must be allocated to the careful collection and analysis of refugee status/data. The publicly available data pertaining to refugee student graduation rates, STAAR performance, AP/IB/Dual-Credit course participation, etc. is nonexistent. With the amount of emphasis that interviewees placed on the unrealistic expectations thrust on refugee students to pass the STAAR test and meet the same state academic standards as their U.S.-born peers, more research and more consistent tracking of refugee student experiences and performance must be implemented to understand the true impact of state and school district standards on refugee academic success. Any data that is gathered should be released and publicly available to provide a firmer analytical foundation for future research in this field.

A refugee student's experience in school can either set them on a path to success or discourage their effective and complete integration into U.S. society. Of course, there is an economic argument to be made for putting resources toward ensuring refugees have successful academic experiences. If refugee students fail to graduate and integrate fully into U.S. life, they are less likely to become contributing and thriving members of society. However, an argument rooted in more humanitarian reasoning can and should also be considered. When asked why

supporting refugee education at the primary and secondary levels is important, the iACT Interviewee responded by saying:

> *We have to remember that refugees are victims of our politics and other people's politics and they did not bring disaster on themselves. They did not choose to be in the war zones and to be bombed and shot at. So, they've already paid a price. They've already suffered and so have their children...So, bringing refugees here is the right thing to do -- giving them a chance to live well and to find jobs…But it's hard for anybody who's an adult to move out of an environment into a strange place…The reason they're willing to sacrifice and come to this unknown place is their children. You ask anybody, any of the refugees why are you here, "I've come for my children. I would never come if it weren't for my children. My children are in danger. I wanted to give them a chance to be better, to get an education, to be successful." And then we give them that box-checking of an education and they cannot do well in school or they drop out of school, and you're defeating, not only that child, you're failing that child, but you're also failing that family's hopes and dreams that they put into that child. They have put in so much of their sweat and tears that they're sacrificing, so it's like a double murder.*

While the future of U.S. refugee resettlement is unknown, plenty can still be done to support those refugees who have already been resettled and attempting to thrive in our communities for the past several years. To honor the sacrifice refugees and their families made in escaping the inhospitable circumstances of their home country to start a new life in the U.S., it is time for policy-makers, researchers, and educators to become serious about understanding the refugee student experience, addressing issues plaguing refugee education across the country, and avoiding the "double murder" of a refugee's hope for the future success of themselves and their children.

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